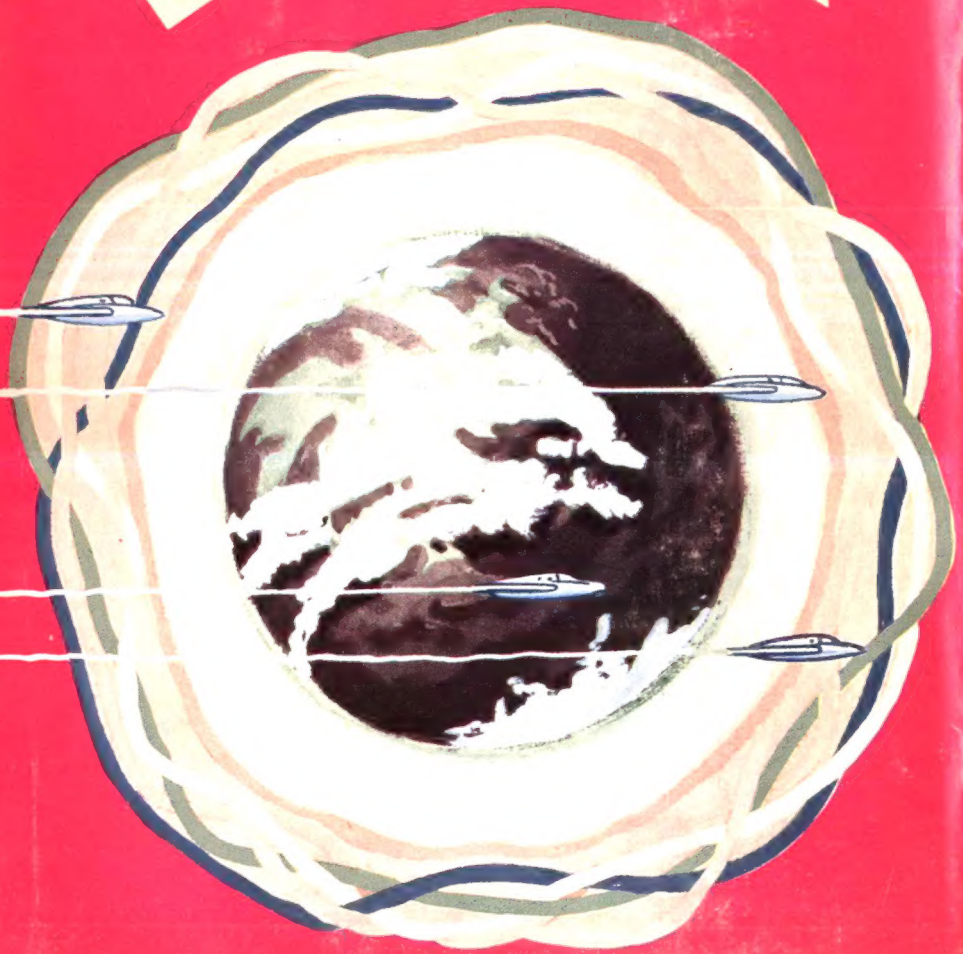
SCIENCE FICTION

SPACE LAWYER

Nat Schachner

A Science-Fiction novel by Nat Schachner

SPACE LAWYER



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Space Lawyer

by Nat Schachner

Practically every young man, at one time or another, has faced the unpleasant task of bolstering up his courage to walk into the boss's office to demand, or at least suggest, that he be given a raise commensurate with his value to the firm. And it will probably always be the same, even in the far future when the great corporations and cartels of Earth have extended their legalistic fingers far out into space to grasp the rights to the planets and asteroids of the Solar System.

But there will always be talented young men such as Kerry Dale, the space lawyer, who pulls himself up by his bootstraps and gives battle to the powerful Simeon Kenton, president, owner, and sole manager of Kenton Space Enterprises, Unlimited. Old Fireball, as his enemies and employees have nicknamed him, ruled over an empire vaster by far than any of old Earth; his "spaceships fastened their flags in the spongy marshes of Venus, on the desolate wastes of Mars, on rocky asteroids and mighty Jupiter itself." It wasn't surprising then that he was utterly flabbergasted and enraged when a young upstart of an assistant's assistant, Kerry Dale, from his legal department, stormed into his private office unannounced, demanded a raise, after practically assaulting him in front of his own daughter, and stamped out after shouting his resignation.

(continued on back flap)

Simeon Kenton had no idea that the matter wasn't closed, that this little heated incident was the first link in a long chain of legal clashes that was to raise the space lawyer up to the level of Old Fireball himself!

Nat Schachner's first science fiction novel in book form is delightfully different reading for the thousands of readers who are becoming tired of the many involved and stereotyped stories of science fiction being published today. With deft skill and an irresistible humor he tells an intriguing story of the legal problems that are bound to crop up when man has finally opened up the new frontier out in space; but it is basically the captivating tale of the space lawyer's ingenious use of legalism in space to triumph over his irascible opponent, Old Fireball.

About the Author

Mr. Schachner, who lives and writes in New York, has a long period of law practice behind him which evidences itself clearly in the ingenious legal situations which unfold in the course of *Space Lawyer*. Although he has published four novels, he is probably best known for his critically-acclaimed biographies *Alexander Hamilton* and *Thomas Jefferson*. His next book, to be published shortly, will be *The Founding Fathers and the Young Republic*.

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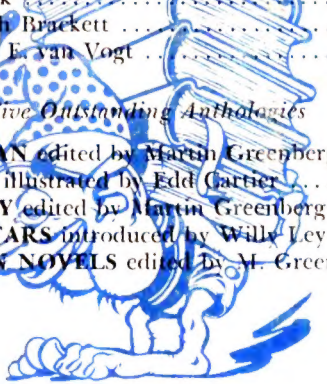

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SPACE LAWYER

by

NAT SCHACHNER

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SPACE LAWYER

CHAPTER 1

SIMEON KENTON was an irascible man. He knew it; the far-flung thousands employed by the Kenton Space Enterprises, Unlimited, knew it. But only his daughter, Sally, knew he worked hard at being an irascible man. And that increased his irascibility to such a pitch that he could only glare and sputter unintelligible words.

"Har-r-rumph!" he spluttered. "If you weren't my own flesh and blood, I'd—"

"You'd be the first to agree that a man in your position owes it to his daughter to see to it that her account isn't perpetually overdrawn."

Old Fireball was his nickname because of his habit of staging explosions on the slightest provocation. He exploded now.

"You get a larger allowance than any girl of your acquaintance," he yelled. "Yet you have the nerve to stand there and ask for more. You must think I'm made of money."

"Aren't you, dad?"

She asked it so innocently and with such a candid air that he felt utterly deflated. "Well, humph, that is—I may have a little money, but—" His indignation rose again. He snatched

the statement of her account from his desk, waved it at her. "Damn it, Sally, I've had enough of this nonsense. Not another cent do you get—"

Father and daughter were standing in the private office of the president, owner and sole manager of the Kenton Space Enterprises. From this small, simply furnished room Simeon Kenton ruled an empire vaster by far than any of the mighty empires of old Earth. Rome, Assyria, England; Teutoslavia, Nippo-China, Australo-America had flung their tight webs over large portions of the Earth's surface—but Simeon Kenton's space-ships fastened their flags in the spongy marshes of Venus, on the desolate wastes of Mars, on rocky asteroids and on mighty Jupiter itself.

Technically it was only a commercial empire, with ultimate sovereignty in the Interplanetary Commission whose seal of approval was necessary on all leaseholds, claims of ownership, mining rights, cargoes, exploitations, wages and hours and conditions of employment. Actually Simeon Kenton was the kingpin of the spaceways, with half a dozen smaller princelets competing with him for concessions, spheres of influence and business.

In the old days, when Simeon was a young man coming up the hard way, there had been no Interplanetary Commission and everything went—much to Old Fireball's irascible satisfaction. Not that he was a tyrant, by any manner of means. He was a driver and a hard taskmaster to his men, admitting of no failure or excuse; but he was fair and quick to reward the worthy. If every man in his employ trembled in his space boots at the sight of him, deep down there was the comforting feeling that Old Fireball knew what he was about, that he would never let them down.

Simeon loved the exercise of power, a vast, benevolent paternalism with himself as the paterfamilias. As space became less of a thing unknown, and law and order took the place of the old scramble for new worlds, however, codes were estab-

lished, spheres were delimited, and space law came into being. All this was much to Old Fireball's disgust. He grumbled constantly of the good old days when men were men and not members of the Interplanetary Union of Spacemen, Blasters, Rocket Engineers, Wreckers and Cargo Handlers, Local No. 176.

"Har-r-rumph!" he'd snort, "if a man's got a grievance, why can't he come direct to me instead of running like a dodgasted infant to whine to his union and the commission? Sure there're chiselers among the other companies. There's that double-dyed leohippus, Jericho Foote, of Mammoth Exploitations. Feeds his men stinking, crawling food, pays 'em when he can't help himself, wriggles out o' his contracts like a Venusian swamp snake. I wouldn't trust that smooth-faced, smooth-talking Simon Legree farther 'n I could throw an asteroid." He rubbed his own straggly white whiskers complacently. "Regulations and laws 're all right for guys like him, but not for me."

Accordingly he instituted a legal department in Kenton Space Enterprises, Unlimited; and many and Homeric were the legal tilts and battles between himself and the commission. He snorted and yowled and tore his hair when a decision went against him and rained maledictions on the unfortunate head of his chief legal adviser, Roger Horn, and on the august members of the commission alike; but if the truth were to be told, he loved it. Space had become too tame and business had become too grooved; and these tilts were the safety valves for his love of a keen-witted fight.

He scared everyone but his daughter. She smiled understandingly at his tantrums and humored him as though he were a crotchety old invalid and went blithely on her way regardless. And they got along famously, even though, as now, he stormed and ranted and fumed.

"Yessiree," he yelled, "not another cent do you get until the next—"

The slide panel opened noiselessly and a young man came into the room. He was a very determined-looking young man with a square jaw and intent blue eyes. Sally Kenton pivoted on a daintily-shod foot to look at the intruder.

The determined young man didn't see her at first. His blue eyes were fixed and his square-jawed face pointed like a hunting dog's directly at the incongruous, mildly whiskered saint's image of her father. There was something very definite on the young man's mind.

"Mr. Kenton," he said, "I've been in your employ for more than a year now and—"

Simeon's pale-washed eyes flashed dangerously behind his glasses. All the irascibility his daughter had frustrated focused on this most impertinent, rash intruder.

"Ah, so you have, have you?" he purred. "And what might be your name, my dear sir?"

"Dale—Kerry Dale. I'm in the legal department, under Mr. Horn. And I think—"

Simeon Kenton seemed to grow on the sight. His chest puffed and his cheeks puffed in unison. He raised on his toes until his five-foot-four assumed the dimensions of a giant. "So you *think*, Mr. Kerry Dale, or whatever your name might be? You think you have the right to barge in on me when I'm in private conference without so much as a by-your-leave and inflict your utterly useless thoughts on *me*. When you've been five years in my employ, not just twelve months, fifty-two weeks, three hundred and sixty-five days, you'll know better than to waste my time with dodgasted nonsense. Get back to your desk, Mr. Kerry Dale, and stay there. That's what I suppose that fool, Roger Horn, is paying out my hard-earned money for—"

He stopped for breath; inflating his lungs for another blast.

But the young man gave him no chance to continue. He was a tall young man and with a certain set to his shoulders, as Sally noted with approval. She enjoyed her father's outbursts

and knew how strong men wilted and blanched before them, and slinked—or was it slunk—away before their withering blasts like whipped dogs. Would this Kerry Dale do the same?

He did not. A certain steely glint hardened his intent blue eyes. "I've always wondered why they called you Old Fireball," he said slowly. "Now I know. The term is apt. I've seen them in space. They're little and all puffed up and they explode at the merest contact with a breath of air and scatter themselves harmlessly. Calm down, sir; or you'll get a stroke."

Sally heard old Simeon's quick, choking gasp. Her own senses tingled. She was going to enjoy this.

"Me—*Old Fireball!* Why, you young snipperwhipper—I mean whappersnipper—damn it, you know what I mean—get out of here before I—"

The young man took a step forward. His hands gripped the fuming old man by the shoulders. "Not before you hear what I've got to say," he snapped. "I'm ashamed of you," he said severely. "I thought there was a *man* running the Kenton Space Enterprises. People said there was. That was why I was anxious to get in. That was why I took a job in that scrape-and-bow legal department of yours as soon as I got out of law school, under that smug old fossil, Roger Horn. That was why I worked my head off, twenty-five hours a day, twisting good, honest law and picking legalisms in the space codes so your piratical deals could sneak through regardless."

His indignation mounted in equal waves with the color in his face, and with each surge he shook the mighty Simeon Kenton just a little harder. "I suppose you think it was your fine Roger Horn, that puffed-out bag of wind, who won you the suit against Mammoth last month? I suppose you think it was that same self-winding Horn who thought up that neat little scheme whereby you obtained legal possession of Vesta against the actual staking-out claim of the government of Mars? Sure he took the credit for it. He always does. Loyalty to the department! Loyalty to Kenton Space Enterprises! Bah!"

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Simeon was choking, spluttering, opening his mouth in vain attempt to make headway against this most remarkable torrent of words from this most remarkable young man, and failing utterly.

Kerry plunged on, not even knowing that Simeon was trying to say something.

"Who cares about your overgrown schemes?" he yelled. "For a year I cared, and became a wage slave. Me, Kerry Dale, *summa cum laude* from the Planet Law School, voted most likely to succeed. Let me tell you what happened this very morning. I went to your ass of a legal chief, as humble as you please. I asked him for a raise; for a job a little above the thirty-ninth assistant-officeboy job I still hold; and what do you think the old windbag told me?"

Simeon opened his mouth again; and it was rattled shut for him. "I'll tell you," Kerry yelled down at him. "He hemmed and hawed and grunted like an old sow and twiddled his thumbs and said it was a fixed rule in the empire of his majesty, Old Fireball, never to grant promotions under three years of slavery. He said—"

Old Simeon found tongue at last. It had swelled with indignation until it protruded from his mouth. "That goddasted blitherskite—I mean that dadgosted slitherblite—did he dare call me *Old Fireball*?"

For the first time Kerry Dale grinned. He released the fuming old man. "He didn't quite call you that," he admitted. "That's my own inventive genius; or rather, the inventive genius of every slaving underling in your employ. But I thought, like a fool, I'd come direct to you. They said you were a hard man and given to tantrums; but fair. I see now they were mistaken."

Old Simeon shook his released shoulders back into position. He twitched his rumpled vest back into shape with a violent

gesture. He saw red—and yellow and purple and a lot of colors not in the normal spectrum.

"Get out of here," he roared, "you—you overgrown son of a space cook! Give you a raise? Sure I'll give you a raise, with a blast of rocket fuel under your space-rotted tail! Get out of here, young man. You're fired!"

"You can't fire me," Kerry Dale said bitterly. "I've already resigned. I resigned as soon as I took a good look at you."

He turned sharply on his heel and stalked out through the open slide panel. The mechanism closed softly behind him. Old Simeon shook his fist. His wispy hair and wispier beard were rumpled, and there was a glare in his eyes.

"Of all the impertinent young—"

Sally was interested; yet offended. Interested in the way this most remarkable young man had maltreated her revered parent—something that no one had dared do as long as she could remember—and offended because in all that stormy interview not once had his eyes strayed toward her; not once had he shown by look or gesture that she was even present. She wasn't accustomed to that sort of treatment any more than Simeon Kenton was accustomed to the kind *he* had received.

Even if she hadn't been Sally Kenton, men's glances would inevitably have gravitated in her direction. She was mighty easy to look at. From the top of gold-brown head to most satisfyingly shapely ankles she attracted attention, and the neat little dimple in her chin and the quick quirk of her lips did their share in fixing that attention. Yet this Kerry Dale had positively not seen her.

"Is that true what he said?" she interrupted Simeon's premeditated flow of language hastily.

Her father almost choked on an epithet; glared at her. "What's true?" he howled.

"That he prepared that Mammoth brief for you and cooked up that deal in which you hornswoggled the Martian Council?"

Sally had learned a thing or two associating with her obstreperous parent.

"How do I know?" he yelled. "That's Horn's business; that's what I pay him for. Do you think I bother my head—"

"You ought to," she told him severely. "It's the business of the head of an organization to know exactly what's going on, down to the last space sweeper," she quoted.

He recognized the quotation. In an off-moment he had permitted himself to be interviewed by the telecaster for the Interplanetary News Service. "Har-r-rumph! I don't know—well, maybe—" He pressed a button.

The florid features of Roger Horn looked startled on the visiscreen. He was a portly, dignified-looking person. His strong, aquiline nose and bushy, beetling brows overawed judges, and his weighty throat-clearings gave the impression of considered thought.

"Ah—yes, Mr. Kenton?"

"There's a young whelp in your department, Horn. Name of Kerry Dale."

"Why . . . ah . . . that is—"

"Save the frills for the Interplanetary Commission. Did he, or did he not write the Mammoth brief?"

Horn looked unhappy. "Why . . . ah . . . in a manner of speaking—"

"Did he, or did he not punch that legal knothole into the Martian claim on Vesta?" old Simeon pursued relentlessly.

The lawyer squirmed. "Well—in a sense—"

Kenton's glare was baleful. Sally chirruped: "There, what did I tell you?" though she hadn't said a thing.

"Quiet!" yelled her esteemed ancestor. His glare deepened on his lawyer in chief. "So that young snipperwhopper was right! I pay you, and he does all the work."

Horn assembled the rags and tatters of his dignity. "Now look here, Mr. Kenton—"

"Quiet!" Simeon thundered him down. "What do you mean by refusing a raise to such a valuable . . . er . . . young man? Do you want that planetoidal scoundrel Foote to get his slimy tentacles on him and show you up for the pompous dincumsnoop you really are? Raise him twenty-five; raise him fifty; but don't let him get away."

Horn looked as though something he ate hadn't quite agreed with him. "I can't," he said feebly. "Young Dale just left here. He said he had resigned."

"Then get him back. Comb the whole dingdratted town for him. Offer him a hundred."

"He said," Horn swallowed hard, "he wouldn't work for Kenton Space Enterprises again if it was the last outfit in the Universe. He said—"

"I don't care what he said. Get him; or else—"

"Y-yes, sir," the lawyer gulped. "I'll do my best."

Old Simeon switched him off, still protesting. "He'll come back," he said complacently, pulling on his chin whiskers. "Just a bit hot-headed, like all youth."

Sally smiled perkily. "Heavy-handed, I'd say rather," she murmured.

Her father winced, rubbed his shoulder.

"About my allowance," she continued. "Do I, or don't I?"

"Not another cent!" he spluttered. Then he caught her eye. "It's blackmail," he howled.

"Of course it is," she agreed sweetly. "I learned that from you, darling. I'm sure you wouldn't want me to mention this little scene I just witnessed. Think how Jericho Foote would love to hear—"

"You wouldn't dare! What's your price?"

"One thousand per month."

"Trying to ruin me? I won't do it—"

"Mr. Foote's such a sweet old thing," she murmured. "I'm sure—"

Simeon groaned. "To think I've nurtured a thingumjig of a

Jovian dik-dik in my bosom. I surrender, child; but beware—"

She kissed him on the forehead. "Darling, when you find that young man, will you let me know?"

He stared hard at her. "So-oh! I'm to get a son-in-law who uses force and violence on me?"

"Don't be horrid, dad!" she flashed indignantly. "You're just trying to get back at me. It's utterly ridiculous!"

CHAPTER 2

WHOLLY UNAWARE of the complicated series of wheels he had just set in motion, Kerry Dale walked disconsolately along the back streets of Megalon, the great new metropolis that had sprung up in the central prairie lands. His hotheadedness had gotten him into trouble again. It wasn't enough he had lost his job, but maltreating the great Simeon Kenton the way he did meant he would be blacklisted in every law office from Earth to distant Ganymede. He was through; washed up! His career was over before it had well begun.

His wandering feet brought him unawares into the suburban district, close to the great spaceport, where every narrow alley held three saloons and half a dozen dives for the benefit of hard-bitten spacemen looking for a spree and a chance to dump the earnings of an entire voyage in a single mad release.

That was what he needed now—a drink!

The light cell scanned him, approved his lack of weapons and police disk, and swung the panel open to admit him.

There were five or six men drinking at the bar. Burly, tough-looking eggs, with that peculiar, deep-etched tan upon their faces that came only from long exposure to the penetrating rays

of space. Kerry shoved up alongside, said: "A double *pulla*, bartender. And start another one going on its heels."

The bartender looked at him curiously, whipped the drink into shape and set it before him. Kerry eyed the pale, watery liquid grimly, downed it neat. "Hurry that second one," he commanded.

The nearer man leaned toward him. "That's powerful stuff to handle, son. You're liable to go out like a meteor."

"What's the difference!" Kerry said bitterly.

"Um—I see. Troubles, eh?"

"Just that I lost my job. And there won't be any other."

The man's eyes brightened. He scanned Kerry up and down with manifest approval.

Kerry downed his second drink morosely. "Thanks for your interest," he said shortly. "But I didn't ask—"

The man came confidentially closer. "Lost your job, eh? Too bad! You wouldn't by any chance be looking for another?"

"There aren't any others," Kerry retorted gloomily.

"*Tsk! Tsk!* How you go on! Here I'm making you a proper offer and you as much as tell me I'm lying."

Kerry stiffened. The *pullas* were taking effect. They made him curiously springy and lightheaded. "What kind of job?"

"A nice job; a lovely job. Join a spaceship and see the Solar System."

"Oh!"

"What's the matter with a space job?" the man demanded belligerently.

"Nothing; except I'm—"

"This here one I'm offering don't require no experience. Cargo handler. Just a couple o' hours work loading and unloading—the rest of the trip you're practically the ship's guest."

"Well. I—"

"Look, matey. The ship's due to blast off in an hour. She's all loaded and battened down. Jem here's top kicker of the

handlers. One o' his men just busted a rib; that's why he needs another man pronto. What d'ya say?"

Kerry considered. And the *pulla* considered with him. It was quite a comedown—from legal light to cargo wrestler. But what the hell! It was a job; and his funds were out.

A flicker of wariness came to him. "What's the name of the ship?"

The first man turned to the man he had called Jem. "I offer him a job an' he goes technical on me," he complained. He turned back to Kerry. "What's the dif, matey, if she's the *Mary Ann* or *Flying Dutchman*?"

Kerry wobbled a little and considered that gravely. The more he thought of it, the more it sounded like brilliant sense.

"Done!" he said suddenly.

The man slapped him on the back. "That's the spirit. Bartender, three *pullas* and make one double-strength."

Twenty minutes later Kerry's guides and mentors helped his weaving feet out toward the spaceport, shoved him halfway up the gangplank that led into the bowels of a space-scarred freighter. Its squat flanks were all battened down except for this single bowport, and the cradle on which it rested had swung slowly into the blasting-off position.

Jem, the cargo boss, helped him along. "In you go, son. Gotta hurry now."

Kerry blinked owlishly at the faded lettering along the bow.

"*Flying Meteor*," he read. "A very good name," he approved with drunken gravity. "A most—"

"Come along," Jem said impatiently.

"*Flying*—Hey!" Kerry was cold sober now.

"What's biting you?"

"*Flying Meteor*. Holy cats! That's a Kenton freighter."

"Sure it is. And why not? Kenton ships 're the best damn ships in space. Now will you come—"

"Not me. I don't ship on a Kenton boat. Not if it's the last job on Earth. Here's where I get off."

"Oh, you do, do you?" growled Jem. He shoved suddenly; and Kerry, off balance, went flying into the hold. The gangplank hauled away, the port slid shut; and the rockets went off with a roar and a splash. "You signed up for the voyage, son; and that's that."

The *Flying Meteor* was bound for Ceres, largest of the asteroids, with a cargo of power drills, atom-explosives, detonators and miscellaneous mining equipment. Ceres was the port of entry for the entire asteroidal belt. Through its polyglot, roofed-in town of Planets streamed all the commerce of that newly exploited sector of space.

For many years since the first exploratory flights no one had paid much attention to the swarms of jagged, rocky little planetoids that filled the gap between Mars and distant Jupiter. They held no air, no vegetation and their bleak stone surfaces looked uninviting to pioneers in a hurry to get out to the more hospitable ground of the Jovian satellites. The Martian Council took formal possession of the four largest—Ceres, Pallas, Vesta and Juno—more for astronomical outposts than for purposes of exploitation. The others were left contemptuously alone.

That is, until a particularly inquisitive adventurer smashed head-on into an eccentrically rotating bit of flotsam not ten miles in diameter. If he hadn't been carrying a cargo of atomite at the time, it wouldn't have proved anything except that he was a bad navigator and that no funeral expenses were required.

But when the space patrols reached the spot they found no hide or hair of adventurer or ship, and about a million meteoric fragments in place of the asteroid. And every fragment was a chunk of solid nickel steel, generously interspersed with glittering rainbow flashes of diamonds, emeralds and rubies.

The nickel steel on assay proved immediately workable—a find of the greatest importance in view of the depleted mines of Earth. Mars, curiously enough, had plenty of copper, but no iron. As for the precious gems, they could be used in barter with the web-footed natives of Venus. Those childlike primitives took an immense delight in glittering baubles of that sort.

Thereupon there was an immediate rush to the Belt from all over the System. It was the kind of rush that harked back to the first gold stampedes on Earth to California and the Klondike, and to the initial space-hurtling to the Moon when rocket flight became a reality. And, as in all rushes, the pioneers, insufficiently prepared against the rigors of space and the dangers of the Belt, starved and suffered and fought among themselves, and found death instead of riches.

Not every rocky waste held within it the precious alloy. Not one in a hundred, in fact. And the lucky prospector, as often as not, had his claim jumped, his first load of metal—blasted out with infinite pains—highjacked, and his bloated body, stripped of space suit, tossed into the void.

Even if he survived the initial dangers, he discovered that it took capital to work his find and transport the metal back to Mars and Earth. *Lots* of capital. And the men of wealth, like similar men of wealth throughout the ages, demanded so huge a slice of the take and their contracts were so cleverly complicated that the unfortunate prospector invariably rather bewilderedly retired with a condescending pat on the back to the *joy palaces* that had mushroomed on Planets, there to rid himself of a modest pension as fast as he could.

Simeon Kenton hadn't come in with the first predatory rush of the men of wealth. He disapproved of their tactics and his disapproval, at first violent with expletives against such slimy snakes as Jericho Foote of Mammoth Exploitations, finally took the cannier form of preying on *them.*

By means of superior resources and brainier lawyers he formed holding companies, took assignments of seemingly

worthless rights from disgruntled miners and then fought the men of wealth through every court in the System until they were bankrupt or glad to sell out for a song. He merged and bludgeoned and purchased until more than a third of the wandering planetoids came under his control by outright ownership or option.

Mammoth Exploitations, his closest competitor and special *bête noire,* held no more than a fifth. Scattered smaller companies and individuals accounted for another fifth; the remainder were still in the public domain, subject to proper filing claims.

Kerry Dale soon found that life as a cargo wrestler was not all beer and skittles. Jem and his very suave companion—who proved to have been a space crimp and who discreetly disappeared to continue his trade after snaring Kerry—had been a trifle reckless with the truth. To call him practically the ship's guest during the trip itself required a peculiar idea of what constituted hospitality.

No sooner had the ship blasted off than they set him to work. And what work! Scrubbing and scouring and restacking bales and cases every time the freighter took a steep curve—which was often—and the loose-packed cargo obeyed the law of inertia and tried to keep head-on in a straight line; running errands for the officers and opening tins of food for the cook; *yessiring* even the rocket monkeys and hunting for non-existent ether-wrenches while the dimwitted spacemen snickered and grinned all over their idiotic faces.

Kerry had sobered fast enough. He demanded to see the captain at once. The captain was a man of few words. He cut short Kerry's flow of explanation. "Put this blasted swab into the brig," he roared, "without food or water until he's ready to work. And if he bothers me again, I'll make rocket fuel of him."

"Yes, sir," said Jem discreetly and yanked the indignant new

cargo handler out of the captain's way before he could say or do something really rash.

"He can't talk to me that way," exclaimed Kerry. "I'm a lawyer and I'll see him and his blasted boss to—"

"Look, son," said Jem, who wasn't a bad fellow at heart. "Don't get yourself into a lather. "If you're really a lawyer—"

"Of course I am."

"Then you ought to know something about space law. You signed articles back there in the saloon, and you're bound by them for the duration. A captain has power of life and death on a trip."

Kerry paused. "Yes, I know. I must have been drunk when I signed."

"You were," Jem told him feelingly. "The way you downed those *pullas*—"

Kerry brightened. "O. K. I'll be a sport. I'll do the work. But as soon as the trip is over, I'll tell that roughneck captain a thing or two."

"Better not," advised Jem. "You'll be under him for a whole year."

"*What?*"

"I told you you were drunk. That contract was Standard Form No. 6. One year on the spaceways."

Kerry's jaw went hard and his eyes blazed. "Old Fireball won't want *me* in his employ that long," he said grimly. "Not after what I had just got through telling him in his own office. Bring on your work, Jem."

It was brought on in a way that surprised even that lithe, athletically fit young man. But he didn't complain, and by the end of the voyage he was on good terms with most of the crew and particularly friendly with Jem. But even as he wrestled cargo and wiped smudgy designs on his perspiring forehead with the back of his hand, Kerry's mind was racing with schemes and plans.

The *Flying Meteor* had no sooner dropped into its landing cradle at Planets and discharged its cargo, and asteroidal leave been granted its crew for the space of a day, than Kerry Dale hustled over to the office of the Intersystem Communications Service.

A most superior young lady looked at his still-smudged countenance with a lofty air. She patted the back of her hair-do with violet manicured hand and said *yes?* with that certain intonation.

"Never mind the act," Kerry advised. "I want to send a spacegram to Simeon Kenton, of Kenton Space Enterprises, Megalon, Earth."

The young lady was indignant. Imagine a low-bred cargo shifter talking to her like that! She tried to freeze him with a glance, but the smudged young man refused to freeze. Whereupon she stared pointedly at his grimy hands, his single-zippered rubberoid spacesuit.

"The minimum for a spacegram to Earth is thirty Earth dollars," she said frigidly. "In advance."

He grinned at her; and somehow his grin made her forget her superiority. "Don't let that get you down, sister," he smiled, leaning confidentially over the stellite desk. "This one's going collect."

"Oh!" she gasped, and the melting thing she called a heart congealed again. "As if Mr. Kenton would honor *your* spacegram. As representative of the Intersystem Communications Service I must definitely refuse to—"

He leaned closer to her. "Don't—" he whispered.

"Don't what?"

"Don't refuse. Read Section 734, Subdivision 2, Clause A of the Interplanetary Code. It says that should an officer or employee of any communications service engaged in the transmission, transference or forwarding of interspace messages refuse to accept any message properly offered for such transmission,

transference or forwarding by any company, individual or individuals, the said officer or employee shall be liable to a fine of ten thousand Earth dollars or fifteen thousand Mars standard units, one half of which shall be paid over to the aggrieved party. How would *you* like to pay that fine?" he asked her.

She was flabbergasted. A cargo wrestler, lowliest of spacemen, quoting law to her, with chapter and verse! Then she rallied the tattered remnants of her dignity. He must have read that in a communications office somewhere. By law that extract had to be posted prominently. She sniffed.

"That's silly," she said. "A message to be properly offered must be paid for."

"Of course! Kenton will pay for it."

"He won't," she retorted. "And, anyway, how do I know?"

"Section 258, Subdivision 6, Clause D, which says, in short, when a member of the crew of any spaceship is lawfully on voyage to any planet, satellite or asteroid, and an emergency arises, he may, at his employer's expense, send such spacegrams, televised communications or other messages as may to him seem proper for the resolving of the emergency. I, my dear young lady, am a member of the crew of the *Flying Meteor*, just landed; said *Flying Meteor* belonging, as you ought to know, to old Simeon himself." Kerry fished out his identification tag, exhibited it. "Now do you, or don't you?"

"I . . . I suppose so," she said weakly. She was getting a bit scared of this incredible space roustabout.

"Good!" He flung her a slip of paper. "Send this off. When the answer comes, send it on to the *Flying Meteor*, Landing Cradle No. 8."

By the time she started reading the message he was gone. As her eyes moved over the lines they became glassy, wild. She cried out: "You can't say anything like—" But she was talking to herself. The office was empty. In a panic she buzzed the visiscreen for her chief. He was out. All responsibility rested

on her. Perhaps she should screen the main office on Mars. But that would take a few hours; and that terrible young man would quote another passage from the Code at her, relating to delays in transmission. Nervously she started the peculiar message on its way.

CHAPTER 3

SIMEON KENTON was engaged in another verbal bout with his daughter. It meant nothing. They both enjoyed it. Old Simeon fussed and fumed and Sally got her way. Which was as it should be.

This time it was about her getting a little space knockabout with a cruising range to the Moon. "It's ridiculous!" he yelled. "And downright dangerous. Why can't you use my piloted machine?"

"Because I don't like Ben Manners, that stodgy old pilot you insist on keeping. Manners, indeed! He hasn't the manners of an old goat."

Simeon was shocked. "Such language, Sally! I'm surprised. Where do you learn such—"

He saw her impish twinkle and stopped in time. "Anyway," he added hastily, "it's dangerous."

"You know I've a Class A license, dad. If the Space-Inspection thinks I'm competent enough to go to Jupiter, I certainly don't see why—"

The visiscreen buzzed. "Message for Mr. Simeon Kenton; message for Mr. Simeon Kenton."

Simeon flung the switch into receptor range. "O. K. Go ahead."

The Megalon operator of the Intersystem Communications Service appeared on the screen. He looked nervous. "It's from Planets, sir."

"Ha! Must be the *Flying Meteor*. Shoot!"

"It . . . it's collect, sir."

"The devil! Since when does Captain Ball send collect? Don't he carry enough funds?"

"Maybe there's trouble," Sally suggested.

"The devil you say!" Simeon was startled. The *Flying Meteor* carried a valuable cargo. "Well, go on there, you!" he roared into the screen. "Don't be keeping me on tenterhooks. What's it say?"

The operator was plainly ill at ease. He cleared his throat. "This . . . uh . . . message . . . uh . . . our company takes no responsibility for—"

"Who the blazes asks you to?" roared Simeon. "It's for me; not for you! Now, hurry up, or by the beard of the comet—"

The operator began to read hastily.

> Simeon Kenton,
>
> Kenton Space Enterprises,
>
> Megalon, Earth.
>
> Dear Old Fireball:
>
> Ha Ha Ha. So you thought you fired me? Take another guess. Back in your employ in crew of *Flying Meteor*. Having a wonderful time. Wish you were here. And don't think you can fire me again. I have ironclad contract for one whole year. I can't stop laughing.
>
> KERRY DALE

Sally began to snicker as the operator gulped on and on. Simeon's face turned a mottled red. His angelic whiskers and

the thin white wisps on his head grew so electric she could almost see the sparks jumping from one to the other.

"Stop!" he roared.

The operator stopped.

"Is he really back on your payroll, father?" Sally asked innocently.

He glared at her. "Quiet! Of all the insufferable impudence, the ratgosted, blatherskited ripscullion!"

"Father, your language! It's not even English!"

The operator said timidly: "Any reply, Mr. Kenton?"

Simeon whirled on the screen. "No!" he shouted. "I mean yes! Take this message. 'Kerry Dale, wherever the blazes you are, you're not—' "

The operator paused in his writing. "Uh—is *that* the address?"

"It ought to be. Bah! You know the blamedadded address, don't you? Then put it in and stop interrupting me.

> Kerry Dale,
>
> Et Cetera, Et Cetera.
>
> You're fired and I mean fired. To blazes with your contract! I'll fight you all the way up to the Council and down again.
>
> KENTON

"There, that will hold the young flipdoodle. Back in my employ, huh!"

"I wonder," murmured Sally.

"Wonder on."

"I wonder if he doesn't *want* you to fire him. He looked like a pretty smart young man to me. In that case, knowing you—as who doesn't—that would be just the kind of a spacegram to—"

Simeon looked startled. "By gravy, Sally, maybe you're right! Hey there!" he yelled into the screen. "Skip that reply. Take another, addressed:

Captain Zachariah Ball,
Flying Meteor,
Planets, Ceres.
Have you young squirt in crew name of Kerry Dale?
If so, reply full details.

KENTON

A few hours later came the answer. Sally had waited for it. She was intensely interested. She told herself it was because she enjoyed watching her esteemed, lovable old parent fuss and fume, and because no one had ever dared stand up to him as this young man was doing. If there was anything deeper in her interest, she wouldn't admit it even to herself.

Captain Ball was brief and to the point.

Kerry Dale member of crew *Flying Meteor*. Cargo handler, Standard Contract No. 6. Signed up Megalon while drunk. Good man but always arguing about rights. Regular space lawyer. Soon take it out of him.

BALL

Old Simeon rubbed his hands softly. His eyes gleamed. "Cargo handler, hey? The toughest, orneriest job in the whole System. Old Fireball, am I?"

He snapped the office of his lawyer in chief onto the screen.

"Yes, sir?" Horn inquired respectfully.

"About our employment contract, Form No. 6, how ironclad is it?"

Horn stroked his jowls complacently. "Not a loophole, sir; from our point of view, that is. We just redrafted it six months ago. The Kenton Space Enterprises binds the employee to everything and is bound practically to nothing."

"Can the employee break it?"

"Break it!" Horn chuckled. "Not unless he wants to pay triple his wages as and for liquidated damages, and be enjoined for the space of five years thereafter from engaging in *any*

gainful employment. Oh, it was carefully drawn, I assure you."

Kenton rubbed his hands very hard now. "Good! Excellent! I must say it was about time you began to earn that outrageous salary I'm paying you."

Horn preened himself. Coming from Simeon Kenton, this was indeed praise! "Well, sir, I'm glad you think—"

Suspicion glowed suddenly in Simeon's eye. "Hey, wait a moment. Did *you* personally draw that contract?"

Horn deflated. "Well . . . uh . . . that is—" he stammered.

"Ahhh! It was that dingdratted Dale, wasn't it?"

"Well . . . uh . . . you see—"

But Kenton had already wiped him off the screen with a violent gesture.

"There, you see," Sally exclaimed happily. "Everything's worked out just fine. Kerry Dale's back in your employ whether he wants to or not. All you have to do is put it up to him. Come back to your legal department, *with* a raise, or stay on as cargo handler. Surely he'll—"

She stopped. When her parent looked as unbearably angelic as he did right now, he had something particularly devilish up his sleeve. She was right.

"Oh, no, child. Kerry Dale is staying right where he is. He made a contract and he's going to live up to it."

Sally suddenly felt sick. This was no longer fun. The thought of that very determined, intent young man, whom she had seen only once and who hadn't even looked that once at her, wrestling with staggering loads and living in grubby spaceship holds for a year did things inside of her.

"You're taking a mean revenge, dad," she exclaimed. "You can't—"

He put his hand against her cheek, stroked it gently. His eyes softened. "You like him, don't you, child?"

"No—that is, yes—I don't know. He didn't even *see* me."

"Let me handle him, Sally. It will be a good experience. If

he's got the stuff in him, this year will bring it out. There's nothing like space for making or breaking men. If he breaks, then we'll know—you and I. If he doesn't, then we're both sure about him."

Kerry Dale sweated and strained at the huge chunks of ore that were rapidly filling the hold of the *Flying Meteor*. The sweat streaked down over his half-naked body and dripped from under his rubberoid paints. As he heaved and juggled, he wondered. Three days had passed since he sent that impudent, carefully deliberated spacegram to Old Fireball, and nothing had happened. It didn't sound right. By all accounts that most irascible old man should have promptly exploded and fired him by return message—which was just what Kerry had counted on. A horrible thought came to him. Had the girl in the office double-crossed him and not sent off the spacegram? His jaw hardened. If she hadn't, he—

Bill, the shipboy, came whistling into the hold. "Hey, Kerry, the cap'n wants to see you. Gee, you must of done somethin' terrible!"

Kerry's fellow handlers stopped work, made clucking sounds of pity. When the captain sent for one of their kind, it meant only one thing—trouble!

Jem said anxiously: "For God's sake, Kerry, whatever it is, don't try to talk back, or you'll land up in the Ganymedan hoosegow. And that ain't no place to be. I've been there," he added feelingly, "so I know."

But Kerry threw down the piece of ore he was handling with a contemptuous clatter. Exultation filled him. He laughed at their anxiety. "So long, fellow slaves!" he waved to them. "I'm through; washed up. I've been waiting for this call. Next time you see me, call me 'Mister.' I'll be a free man, free of Old Fireball and his lousy ships. Bon voyage, *mes pauvres*."

They stared after his swaggering exit. Jem shook his head and looked anxious.

Captain Ball greeted his cargo handler with a smile. It was a grim smile, but Kerry didn't note that. All he saw was the spacegram in the captain's hand.

"This is for you, Dale," purred the captain. "Direct from Mr. Kenton himself."

"Direct from Old Fireball himself?" said Kerry jauntily. "Very sweet of him to fire me in person. *Tsk! Tsk!*"

He spread out the spacegram; read:

> Dale:
>
> Fire you? Not at all. Glad to have you in employ as cargo monkey. Suits your talents perfectly. One whole year!
>
> KENTON

Kerry was shocked; more, he was dumbfounded. The old scoundrel! He could see him laughing fit to kill in that office of his. He had outsmarted Kerry. A whole year doing this rotten, jumping job! He'd be damned if—

Captain Ball said grimly: "It may interest you to know that I also received a spacegram. I'm to make you toe the mark." He laughed nastily. "As if I had to be told that. Now get back to your work, you ether-scum, and don't let me catch you laying down on it or I'll put you in irons with extreme pleasure. Git!"

Kerry got. It was a much sadder and wiser young man who came back into the hold to meet the queries first, then the gibes of his shipmates.

"*Mister* Kerry Dale!" mimicked one. "He ain't gonna be no slave no more, nohow. No, sirree. *He's* gonna tell Captain Ball and Old Fireball, too, just where they get off. Yes, sirree."

"Lay off the lad!" commanded Jem sharply.

Kerry grinned painfully. "Let them talk, Jem. I've got it coming to me. I thought I was smart." Then his jaw squared. "But I'm not through yet, not by a long shot."

"Good lad!" approved Jem. "Now about that load over there—"

The *Flying Meteor* cleared for Earth; picked up another cargo, returned to Ceres. Kerry had never worked so hard in his life. He gained a new respect for the brawny spacemen and their ability to take it. He was fast becoming one of them himself. The rough work hardened and deepened him, and he gained the saddle-grained tan that was the hallmark of all the men of space.

Captain Ball rode him; but there was no persecution. No excuses were permitted; no extra shore leave granted him, as sometimes happened to the other members of the crew. The letter of the contract was religiously upheld.

He didn't have a single comeback, Kerry reflected bitterly. He had drawn that blasted contract only too well; so well that even *he* couldn't find a single loophole in it.

The first resentment passed. Old Fireball had hoisted him with his own rocket, and that was that. But he was determined before the year was up to make that chortling old man regret the day he had triumphed so easily over him. Just how he'd do it, he didn't know as yet. But his brain worked overtime, seeking opportunities.

In Megalon he saw a telecast. It was the only recreation he could manage in the six-hour shore leave his contract called for. The feature—a rather dreary tale of adventure on a still-unexplored Saturn—bored him. The way these writer chaps dress up space life! I bet not one of them ever set foot on a spaceship. Then the news program flashed on.

"And now," said the announcer, "we'll show you Miss Sally Kenton, the beautiful, high-spirited daughter of Simeon Kenton, and sole heiress to all his millions. She's about to take off for the Moon in her new, special-job flier. It's a honey, as you'll see immediately for yourselves; and—I don't mind telling you—so is she. In addition to her other accomplishments, Miss

Kenton is the only woman holder of the Class A Flight License."

"Huh!" snorted Kerry in the depths of his seat. "Her old man's pull got her that. And why is it that every girl who's born to millions is beautiful, according to the announcers. I bet she's cross-eyed and bowlegged and—"

"Shut up!" Jem said genially. They had gone together. "Did you ever see her?"

"No; and I don't want to."

"Well, I have. On the telecast, that is. But here she is." The rocket field swam into view. The one-seater flier gleamed and sparkled with sleek stellite. It was a beauty. But Kerry jerked upright in his seat at the sight of the girl who stood at the open port. Her windblown hair rippled in the sunshine; her piquant face was turned smilingly toward the visiscreen.

"Well?" murmured Jem admiringly. "Cross-eyed, hey? Bowlegged?"

"Holy cats!" breathed Kerry. "I . . . I thought she was Old Fireball's secretary."

Jem snorted. "*She* don't have to work. Even if she wasn't born to money. Not with those looks!"

But Kerry wasn't listening. Even after the newscast shifted elsewhere he sat in a daze. He had dreamed of that girl. Even though they hadn't said a word to each other. And now his dreams collapsed. Aside from everything else—he had used violent hands on her father, and even more violent words. Oh, well, the hell with it! Might as well be hung for a wolf as for a sheep. He'd show the precious pair of them a thing or two before he was through.

But two more trips intervened, and a month had passed; and still he was a wrestler of cargoes. He cudgeled his brain and he utilized every spare shore leave to seek opportunities for striking back at the smug Old Fireball. He drew only blanks.

Then, back at Planets again, there was a hitch. They were due to pick up an especially fine load of high-grade electro-magnetite. Back on Earth this alloy of rare metals cost a hundred dollars a ton to produce and industry clamored for all it could get. The atom-reactors which powered the world's work were lined with the alloy. Nothing else could stand up as well or as long under the terrific explosions of the bursting atoms.

Only two months before, however, one of Simeon Kenton's exploration expeditions had found an asteroid on the very outer edge of the Belt, not far from Jupiter itself, which was practically sheer electro-magnetite. The asteroid was small, yet the experts figured it at sixty thousand tons of workable metal. At a hundred dollars a ton—

"Lucky stiff!" stormed Jericho Foote, of the rival Mammoth Exploitations, and sent a ship posthaste to chart every asteroid in the vicinity of the find. The expedition came back with sad news. There were plenty of asteroids, all nicely mapped and orbits plotted; but nary a one was anything but useless burnt-out slag and rock. And there the matter dropped.

This was the first load that had been mined. And the fat-bellied, slow-moving scow that was freighting it to Ceres for transshipment to Earth on the *Flying Meteor* had broken down in space about a million miles from Ceres. A radio flash came in, calling for a tow. A tow-ship, with special magnetic grappling plates, started out. It would take almost a week before the crippled ship would come in.

Captain Ball swore deeply, but there was nothing else to do but wait. Perforce he gave his crew shore liberty. He was so upset by the mishap that he forgot to exclude Kerry Dale from the coveted leave.

So that Kerry found himself wandering the inclosed streets of Planets, seeking something to do. There was plenty to do, if you cared for that sort of stuff. Joy palaces, drink dives, gambling layouts, honkatonks, razzle-dazzles—all the appurtenances of a System outpost calculated to alleviate the bore-

dom of space and wrest away from its wayfarers the hard-earned pay they had accumulated.

The crew of the *Flying Meteor* went to it with whoops of joy and a spray of cash. Even Jem, ordinarily sober and steady, fell for the lure.

"Come along, Kerry," he urged. "It will do you good. Cap Ball's liable to wake up any moment to the fact that you're included in the leave."

Kerry shook his head. "Not me, Jem. I still remember how I got so drunk I didn't know what you gave me to sign."

Jem looked pained. "You aren't holding that against me, lad?"

"Not at all. That was your job. But I've got other fish to fry; and I've a hunch that somewhere on Ceres I'll find both fish and frying pan."

So he walked the streets, heedless of the siren calls from overhanging windows, thinking hard. He simply *had* to get back at that old rascal, Simeon Kenton. But how?

This discovery of his—electro-magnetite. Six million dollars worth of stuff dumped into his lap. Could anything be done about *that*? He couldn't see how. The claim of ownership to the asteroid had been filed. Properly filed, without doubt. Kerry remembered the meticulous care they had used back in Horn's office to check on every claim. Horn was a pompous old ass, but he knew about mining claims. There'd be nothing there.

Still—it wouldn't hurt to take a look. Might as well, in fact. Planets wasn't built to provide distractions for men of his stamp. So his feet moved him rapidly toward the Bureau of Mining Claims and Registrations.

Ceres had jurisdiction over the entire Asteroid Belt. Every claim, every title, had to be registered there to be valid.

Dale walked into the Records Department, asked to see the file on Planetoid No. 891. This was the way Kenton's find was

listed—the jagged little bit of metal was too tiny for a name.

A can of film was handed Kerry and he was given a projection room in which to examine it. Carefully he studied the elements of the claim on the projection screen, running it over and over.

After an hour, he gave it up with a sigh. The chain was airtight and space-tight. Horn had done a proper job on it. Old Fireball would hold title until Kingdom Come. Every possible contingency had been provided for. Prior liens, mineral rights, space above and core beneath.

Glumly he turned the can back to the clerk. The clerk said conversationally: "Lucky guy, that Kenton."

"Yes."

"Jericho Foote's been taking a fit. He must of spent a cool hundred thousand on that expedition of his alongside. All he brought back for it was a beautiful chart of that whole sector of space."

Kerry said suddenly: "Got it here?"

"Sure. All those things go on file. Want to see it?"

"Might as well. I've got nothing else to do."

The clerk examined him curiously. To outer appearance, in his rubberoid suit and with his calloused hands, Kerry was just another cargo wrestler. Nothing else to do in Planets, huh?

A bit offended in his local pride the clerk withdrew, returned with a larger can.

Kerry took it into the projection room.

It was a beautiful chart, he acknowledged. Foote had sent along one of the best cartographers in the System. Every sector was carefully plotted, every asteroid, every speck of space dust put in its proper place and the elements of its orbit set forth in measured tones.

Idly, Kerry checked some of the orbits on a scratch pad. Back in college, before he had gone in for law, he had been pretty good at space mathematics.

He plotted a few of them, for no special reason, but just to see if he still knew how to do them. He did.

The courses were pretty complicated, what with Jupiter, Mars, the Sun and all the other asteroids pulling on one another. The orbits did loops and curlicues and led nowhere in particular.

He was about to give it up, when he came across a somewhat larger bit of flotsam, perhaps a mile across at its greatest diameter. According to the accompanying data it was an arid waste of congealed lava, with a pitted, glassy surface. Nothing on which to waste a second glance. Yet there was something curiously familiar about the elements of its orbit. He stared hard at them. Where had he seen similar ones?

Kerry riffled through his sheets of calculations, stopped suddenly at his figures on Planetoid No. 891. There it was. Allowing a differential angle of six degrees to Plane Alpha the two sets of elements might have been twin brothers.

An idea groped in the back of Kerry's head. He began to plot the course of the second asteroid, No. 640. His pencil raced and his brain raced. His excitement mounted as the complicated elements unfolded. Checking each set against those of No. 891, it seemed—it seemed—

The last equations were down, the spacegraph drawn. Feverishly he superimposed the twisting curve on that of No. 891. If his first approximation was correct, the two asteroids should collide on December 17th, Earth Calendar. It was now December 13th!

He went to work again rapidly, taking successive approximations. Then he was staring blankly at the curves. The sweeping lines approached each other, closer, closer, so close that they practically brushed; then swung away in widening loops to separate sectors of space. Practically brushed each other; but not quite. His first approximation had shown actual contact. The final figures disclosed a distance of three miles at the point of closest approach!

Three miles is not much; but when one deals with two bits of rock, one not more than two hundred feet in diameter, and the other about a mile, and both hurtling along at speeds of several miles per second, three miles becomes a yawning, unbridgeable chasm. There would be no collision!

The vague idea that had been burgeoning in Kerry's head collapsed. Another scheme to do something about Old Fireball's victory over him died a-borning. He was licked again.

He sat there, staring at the figures as though he could by the mere act of concentration shift them just the slightest. Three measly little miles! So near and yet so far. If only there was a way—

He whooped, and the echo in the confined projection chamber startled him. It was a long-shot gamble. There were half a dozen incalculable factors, each of which had to fall neatly into place; but he'd be damned if he wouldn't try it.

Very casually he returned the can of film to the clerk. Even more casually, though his heart was hammering, he asked for the Claims Registration Book.

His finger stopped at Planetoid No. 640. The registered owner was one Jake Henner, and his official address was the Gem Saloon, Planets, Ceres.

"Got what you were looking for?" asked the obliging clerk.

Kerry found it hard to keep his face blank. "Wasn't looking for much," he said. "Thanks!"

But out in the street Dale hailed a swift little gyrotaxi. "Gem Saloon!" he snapped. "And never mind the speed limits."

"What a break! What a break!" he exulted to himself. "Imagine if the owner had been old Kenton or Mammoth or some guy who lived on Venus!"

"Here y'are, buddy." The gyro-driver came to a halt. "The Gem Saloon in four minutes flat. And I got me a fine, too. Doing a hundred an' twenty on a city street. See up there!"

Kerry looked obediently at the little oblong screen above the dashboard. On it, flashing neatly, was imprinted a summons

for violation of the traffic laws. The photoelectric cells at each crossing had clocked the gyro's speed. At it passed the legal limit, the automatic mechanism recorded the offender's license, sent out the impulses that printed the summons in the offender's cab.

"What'll the fine be?"

"Ten bucks."

Kerry fished in his pocket. "Here it is, and the fare and a tip. It was worth it."

"Gee, thanks!"

The Gem Saloon was on the outskirts of Planets. It wasn't one of the higher-class razzledazzles. It was just a cheap joint in a cheap neighborhood. Which, strangely enough, pleased Kerry no end.

He went in. A couple of shabby men were drinking rotgut brew. A frowsy-looking bartender with a dirty, slopped-over jacket was lackadaisically leaning an elbow on the bar. Business was not so good.

"Where can I find Jake Henner?" asked Kerry.

The bartender did not even shift his glance. "You're looking at him right now, buddy. An' I don't mind tellin' you meself he ain't much tuh look at."

"Not so bad, Mr. Henner," Kerry said critically.

"Just call me Jake. If it's a drink you want, speak up. If it's money, you're wasting your time."

"I'll take the drink; and maybe I'll *give* you money, Jake."

The man perked up. He slopped some firewater into a dirty glass, set it before Kerry. "Say, mister, don't give me heart failure, speakin' so easy-like about money. They's gonna throw me outa here soon if I don't pay the taxes."

"You registered Planetoid No. 640 in your name, didn't you?"

The eager look died. "Yeah!" he said bitterly. "Coupla years ago me an' a pal got ourselves a grubstake an' went prospectin'. Didn't find a damn thing. The pal up an' blows hisself tuh bits

on that blasted little speck o' nothing. There wasn't anything left tuh bring back tuh bury, so I sorta registered the rock for his sake, me bein' sentimental-like."

"And a very good sentiment, too," approved Kerry. "You wouldn't want to sell that bit of sentimental desert for fifty bucks, cash?"

Jake looked suddenly suspicious. "Whoa there!" he exclaimed. "There ain't been somethin' found there what I don't know about?"

"Don't be silly," Kerry told him severely. "Did *you* find anything? Did the Mammoth crowd who landed there find anything?"

"No." Jake scratched his head. "Whatcha want it for, then?"

Kerry leaned over the bar; whispered. "I'm a spaceman, see! I get chances to pick up things here and there; and I need a place to cache the stuff until I can get it away safely. Of course, if you don't want to sell No. 640, that's all right with me. It's convenient, but there's a hundred other asteroids just as convenient."

"Make it two hundred bucks."

"Seventy-five."

"One fifty, mister, and the deal's closed. So help me—I need—"

"One hundred," Kerry told him firmly, "and not a penny more. It's found money for you."

"Gimme!"

"*After* you sign the proper papers, my dear Jake."

Two hours later Kerry was the sole and legal owner of Planetoid 640, with all the rights, appurtenances, hereditaments and easements adhering and accruing thereto. Step Number One!

Now for the next and more difficult step!

He reported to Captain Ball.

The captain's eyes gleamed. "Oh yes, Dale. I had completely forgotten. You've been sneaking extra shore leave. Your contract calls for twelve-hours leave for each week in port. You're already overdrawn, so—"

"Kenton Space Enterprises ought to thank its lucky stars I took the time I did," he interrupted.

The captain stared. "What do you mean by that?"

"Just this. I happened to wander into the Registration Office. Looking at . . . er . . . orbital data is a hobby of mine. Used to be good at mathematics; and I like to keep up my figuring."

"Come to the point."

"In due time, captain. Being a loyal employee of Kenton Space Enterprises, Unlimited, I naturally looked at our Asteroid No. 891 first."

The captain grunted suspiciously.

Kerry paid no heed. "And being properly curious about Mammoth Exploitations, our hated rival, I looked at their futile charts if only to get a laugh."

"Hm-m-m!" said the captain. "What's your bloody schoolwork got to do with me?"

"I'm telling you, captain." Kerry smiled sweetly. "If you, or anyone else, would wish to calculate the orbits of our precious asteroid and of Planetoid No. 640 in the same area, you or he would discover, as I did, that they intersect simultaneously on December 17th. And that intersection, Captain Ball, means *smash* for almost six million dollars worth of firm property, not to speak of the lives of the forty-odd men who are mining the stuff."

Captain Ball said hoarsely: "If this is your idea of a practical joke, Dale—"

"I told you; get the company's experts to check me. There are duplicate charts at Megalon. Tell them to check No. 891 against 640. But remember, December 17th is only four days away."

The captain was a man of action. "I intend to," he said grimly. "And Heaven help you if you're trying to make me look like a fool!"

But Kerry Dale obviously was not. The ether surged with spacegrams. A frantic message came from Simeon Kenton. Working at top speed, his experts had taken the charted elements of the two asteroids, as Kerry had suggested, and sure enough, on December 17th they would meet in head-on collision.

"Get every man off No. 891," jittered Kenton. "And do something, do anything, to shift that infernal bit of rock away. Six million dollars!"

The captain called Kerry into conference, as Kerry thought he would. His face was a black thundercloud.

"Easier said than done," he growled. "The *Nancy Lee's* bust in space. All they've got out at No. 891 is a floating shed to house the miners until she comes back. Even if I send them a radio, they couldn't get away."

"The *Flying Meteor*, if it starts fast, could get there with some hours to spare," Kerry pointed out.

"I suppose we could," the captain admitted. "But how about Kenton's other instructions? What does he think I am —God? I suppose he thinks all I've got to do is to slip a tow chain around an asteroid, and haul it out of harm's way. Yet if I don't do something, he'll go ranting and tearing around, and I'll be in the soup."

In his unhappiness the incongruity of his complaining to a lowly cargo wrestler did not strike him.

"I've an idea, captain, which may or may not work," Kerry said quietly.

The captain was ready to grasp at straws. Sometimes Old Fireball expected the impossible from his men, and when they didn't or couldn't deliver, they heard from him plenty. And it *was* six million bucks.

Kerry frowned as if in deep thought. "The total mass of No. 891 is only about eight hundred thousand tons, isn't it?"

"Well?"

"A not impossible amount of power, applied tangentially and in the direction of the orbit, could shift it slightly from its course. It wouldn't take much of a shift to avoid a collision."

"True enough," Ball admitted. "But where's the power coming from, and how is it going to be applied?"

"You forget No. 891 is almost solid electromagnetite. If we can set up a powerful countermagnetic field in the immediate vicinity—"

The captain's face cleared. "By Heaven, Dale, you've got something there. Our magnetic tow plates."

"Yes, sir."

"But how much juice would we need? It would be a damn delicate job to give it the right boost."

"Damn delicate, captain," Kerry agreed. "I'll do the figuring, but there are so many complicating factors the whole thing will be a gamble."

"Let it be. We can't lose anything by trying." Captain Ball pressed buttons. Men's faces appeared on the visiscreen, gave way to others. He barked orders. Rush relays of storage batteries on board, additional power units and booster cells. Televise No. 891 to prepare for instant evacuation. Fill all fuel tanks. Stand by for instant take-off!

He turned to Kerry, stroked his chin. He cleared his throat. "By the way, Dale; about your job. I don't think it will be necessary for you to do cargo hustling from now on. Move your dufflebag into the bow cabin. You're acting third officer."

"Thank you, captain," Kerry acknowledged gravely. Not until he was safely out of sight did he permit himself a grin. Everything was working out far better than he had dared hope.

The first hurdle had been the experts back on Earth. They had made the very mistake he had prayed they would; the same

one of which he himself had first been guilty. In their hurry, and because he had deftly focused their attention wholly on the two asteroids immediately involved, they had overlooked the concomitant gravitational pulls of the other small bodies in the vicinity. These were charted with any degree of accuracy only on the Mammoth map. Foote had filed a copy on Ceres because it was the law. Duplicate filing on Earth was a courtesy, and Foote had been in no mood for courtesies.

The second hurdle had been to get Captain Ball to follow his suggestions. Kenton's explosive spacegram, with its seeming grant of unlimited authority, had unwittingly helped.

The *Flying Meteor* hurtled the void to No. 891 in three Earth days flat. They found a bewildered crew of men huddled in the captive shelter, anchored to the rushing little segment of purplish metal by a steel chain, and holding its distance by means of a weak repulsive current. All their tools and equipment had been salvaged, and the deep pit in the asteroid showed bare and forlorn.

The transfer of men and materials into the capacious hold of the *Flying Meteor* was a matter of some two hours. Every instant was precious. They could not see the oncoming No. 640. It was still about half a million miles away, and its mile-wide dullness of dark lava could not be picked up in the deep confusion of the Belt. But they knew it was there and that, in less than twenty-four hours, the two bits of space wreckage would crash. Dale had said so; and he had been confirmed by the men back home.

"Have you worked out the amount of power we need, Mr. Dale?" the captain asked anxiously. "And at what specific point it's to be applied?" It was *Mr.* Dale now, as became a newly appointed officer.

"Yes, sir." Kerry thrust a sheet of figures at him. "But remember, sir," he warned, "I can't guarantee they'll do the

trick. Space here in the Belt is full of conflicting pulls and repulsions. I had to disregard most of them, and pray that they cancel themselves out."

"I know; but we've got nothing to lose by trying. They're due to crash, anyway. Take your figures below to Mr. Carter, and let him get up the necessary power."

Kerry delivered the message. Meanwhile the ship had moved on No. 891's tail, and jockeyed into the exact position he had calculated. Kerry grinned; then grew a bit worried. He had covered himself against seeming failure; which, in fact, from his point of view, would be complete success. For the data he had laboriously compiled would, if everything went right, give just sufficient of a fillip to No. 891's tail to send it delicately grazing against the still invisible No. 640.

But would everything go right? The slightest bit one way would thrust them wholly untouched past each other; the slightest bit the other way would mean a head-on collision, with total destruction of the two compact little bodies. He didn't want that, either.

The power surged and throbbed in the ship's stout steel plates. The engines roared and the boosters thrummed their song. Long, pencil streamers of flame darted from the rocket tubes, checking, accelerating. They were a bare two miles behind the asteroid, itself no larger than the ship; and at the speeds they were traveling, the slightest deviation might mean a terrific crash.

Magnetic currents flowed and crisscrossed the gap. Waves of repulsion kicked the big freighter, by much the lighter of the two straining forces, right off its course. But each time Carter, the chief engineer, did miracles with the rocket tubes to get them back into line.

The crazy gyrations of the pursuing ship were obvious to everyone on board. But the opposite reaction on the purplish gleam of plunging asteroid was not so obvious.

The hours passed, and still no discernible effect could be observed. It was impossible, with the instruments on board, to detect the infinitesimal shift in the angle of flight which was all that was required.

Asteroid No. 640, the villain in the piece, hove into view. It was coming at an acute angle to its prey, cutting sharply in front. Would they collide? Would they not? Would there be a smash? Would they only graze? If they grazed, would they stick; or sheer off again? If they smashed, what would happen to the *Flying Meteor*, only two miles behind? These were questions that tortured Kerry as he strained to watch. His whole future, perhaps the lives of every one on board, depended on the answer.

Closer and closer they rushed on each other, with the *Flying Meteor* like a watchdog snapping at the heels of the smaller one. Closer and closer, while the power surged and the repulsions leaped across the void. All hands on board pushed and shoved at the portholes, straining their eyes and holding their breaths. Six million dollars' worth of precious metal hung in the balance!

Closer! Closer! Then a cheer went up. Jem yelled excitedly: "They're going to clear!"

Kerry felt a little sick. They *would* clear. He had miscalculated. A decimal place, perhaps, had gone wrong; some force had not been taken into account. Oh, well, he'd get the honor of having saved the asteroid. Old Fireball would have to be properly grateful. But that wasn't what he wanted. He wanted to stand up to the man, not to come crawling to him with gifts in his hand.

A great groan went up. Kerry opened his eyes. He had involuntarily closed them.

The two asteroids, one so relatively large it almost swallowed the smaller, seemed to hang together. No. 891 shivered and dipped. It turned inward.

For one terrible moment Kerry was in agony. They would

crash. He, personally, in his anxiety to outsmart Simeon Kenton, had blown to smithereens immensely valuable metal, important to the industries of the System.

Another cry echoed in the hold of the pursuing ship. The two small planetoids, of unequal size, trembled together. There was a little puff of smokelike lava dust that rose outward in a cloud; the heavier metal of No. 891 ground and scraped tangentially along the surface of No. 640; then both space-wanderers nestled snugly together and rushed on a swerving course, held by mutual pull and the inertia of their common speed.

Captain Ball unbent so far as to shake Kerry's hand violently. "Grand work!" he crowed. "No. 891 is absolutely undamaged. There's a groove on No. 640, but what the hell! It's just a bit of waste lava. We could leave things as they are; or get some tractor ships from Ceres to help separate them."

"Not bad!" Kerry agreed quietly. "But I think we'd better get back to Ceres and send for instructions before you do anything."

"Of course! I intended that. But you've done a swell job, Mr. Dale. Simeon Kenton will be tickled."

How tickled, the worthy captain had no means of knowing at the moment.

For, once back on Planets, Kerry hurried ashore, filed certain affidavits with the startled authorities, then sent a spacegram addressed to Simeon Kenton, President, Kenton Space Enterprises.

It was short and to the point.

> As owner Planetoid No. 640 must demand damages my property due to fall of Planetoid No. 891 understand you own. Advise immediately if you'll pay before suit.
>
> DALE

Back came the blistering reply:

Dale,
Planets, Ceres
You're damn fool as always. Was going to pay reward and offer big job. Now you can go to hell. Your blithering asteroid valueless, damage worth six cents. Cash en route. Will file counterclaim as soon as we separate the asteroids and determine damage to my own.

KENTON

Kerry's grin was a positive delight. Space surged again.

Kenton,
Megalon, Earth
Thanks for the compliments. Six cents refused. What do you mean *your* asteroid? No. 891 *my* property now. Read Section 4 Article 6 of Space Code. Who's damn fool now?

DALE

Back on Earth old Simeon went into a veritable ecstasy of explosive anger. His epithets burned holes in the office furniture, and melted the lucite walls. Even Sally was startled, though she had thought herself thoroughly immune to her estimable ancestor's language.

"What's the matter, dad?" she queried.

He danced up and down the length and width of the office. "That dodrotted, incinerated, langasted skibberite you think's so grand! Look at this now! Look, I tell you!"

"Don't yell so," she reproved. "You'll break a blood vessel." She took the spacegram from his trembling fingers. "Hm-m-m!" A little smile made impudent curves of her lips. "Have you read Section what-is-it yet?"

Old Simeon glared at her. He slammed open the visiscreen.

"Horn," he barked, "what's Section 4, Article 6 of the Space Code say?"

"Well . . . uh . . . offhand I don't know, but—"

"Oh, you don't, don't you? You have to look it up, do you? I bet that ding-the-ding-ding Dale didn't have to look it up. He had it at his fingertips. Go on, look it up! Don't stand there like a bleating doodlebug."

Horn swallowed hard. Within a minute he was back on the screen.

"It reads, sir, as follows:

> 'In the event that a freely moving body in space, not artificially produced or manufactured by man or machine, shall fall on or in anywise impinge upon the surface of a planet, satellite or asteroid, the said body so falling or impinging shall forthwith become the property of the record owner of title to the surface of such planet, satellite or asteroid upon which the same has fallen or impinged as aforesaid.' "

Kenton broke into a delighted chuckle. "Ha! Got that blasted skalawoggle on the hip. Thought he was smart, huh! *I've* got an asteroid, too. I can claim *his* fell on mine." He rubbed his hands. "I'll take him all the way up to the highest courts; I'll spend thousands to—"

Horn scowled down at the book in his hands. "If I might venture to suggest, sir—"

"Go on and suggest, Horn." Old Simeon was in high good humor. He even smiled benevolently.

"There's a definition here of a falling body, sir. You didn't give me a chance—"

"Hah! What's that?"

"It says:

> 'A falling body is defined as the lesser in mass of two bodies when two freely moving bodies in space

collide or impinge on each other in any manner or form.'

"I took the trouble to look up the respective masses, sir. Planetoid No. 891, the one that . . . ahem . . . *used* to belong to us, has a gross of seven hundred ninety-two thousand, three hundred and eighty-one tons. Planetoid 640, sir, has a gross of twelve million, five hundred eighty-eight thousand, four hundred and thirty-seven tons."

Sally said: "This Kerry Dale seems to have you there, dad."

"Why . . . why," he gasped, "it's outrageous; I won't have it. Six millions of my hard-earned money going to that snipper-whopper! Can't you *do* something, Horn?"

"I'm afraid not. The law is clear. I'd suggest a settlement."

"Settlement be darned!" he stormed. "I'll—"

"You'd better, dad," Sally advised. "After all, six million—"

He groaned, sputtered and gave in. He composed a space-gram that he thought was a crafty masterpiece.

Dale,

Planets, Ceres

You're a space robber and a scoundrel. Will start suit at once and win. To avoid suit I'll permit you to settle. Offer you fifty thousand cash in return for general release. Will pay expenses of removing my property. Answer at once or suit goes on file.

KENTON

In due time came the answer:

O. K. Give me hundred thousand and we *both* sign releases.

DALE

"Ha!" chuckled Simeon. "I thought that would scare the pants off him. For a measly hundred thousand he gives up clear title to six millions. Quick, Horn, draw the releases and shoot

them on to Ceres with a draft for the money before the young fool recovers from his fright."

The releases were signed and exchanged; and the draft was cashed.

Simeon told his daughter happily: "There, you see, my dear, no one can get the best of your father. That young—"

A most agitated expert burst into the office; in his excitement he even forgot to announce his coming. He was Bellamy, chief expert of the Kenton Scientific Staff.

"A . . . a most terrible mistake has been made," he stammered, "a-about th-that asteroid."

"Ah!" murmured Sally to herself. "Maybe Kerry Dale wasn't so foolish as darling dad thought."

"What about it?" snapped Kenton.

"We miscalculated the orbits. We were so . . . rushed for time, we weren't able to send to Ceres for a copy of the Mammoth chart. I . . . I thought of it only yesterday. With the new factors on hand, I re-calculated the elements."

A terrible suspicion grew on Simeon.

"They . . . they wouldn't have met," Bellamy went on unhappily. "They would have cleared by three miles if the *Flying Meteor* hadn't pushed them together."

Sally ran to her father. For once she was seriously alarmed. He seemed to be having a stroke. His face went a deep purple and his breath wheezed. "I'll sue him," he gasped. "I'll get my money back. I'll bankrupt him for fraud and conspiracy, for—"

"Wait a minute, dad," said Sally. "You can't."

"Why can't I?"

"You gave him a general release."

For a long moment old Simeon glared at her. Then he fell weakly into a chair and a certain awed admiration came into his eyes. "The dingdasted good-for-nothing! No wonder he sold out so fast and so cheap. He outsmarted me . . . *me*, Simeon Kenton."

He rose from his chair. "Daughter," he said impressively, "mark my words, that young man will go far!"

But Sally wasn't there any more. She had quietly slipped out. She wanted to send a private spacegram of her own. It read:

Kerry Dale,
Planets, Ceres
Congratulations! Keep up the good work!
SALLY KENTON

CHAPTER 4

SIMEON KENTON was in a terrific temper. He paced up and down the confines of his office with short, rapid steps that tossed his deceptive halo of white hair into utter confusion. His mildly whiskered saint's visage was screwed up into unutterable knots. In his tight-clutched fingers was a blue spacegram which he shook violently at his daughter at each choking pause in his peroration.

"Dadblast that dingfoodled young scalawag of a Kerry Dale," he exploded. "Look at this, will you? Of all the impudent, soncarned—I mean condarned—damn it, you know what I mean!"

"I think I know what you mean," his daughter, Sally, admitted demurely. Her eyes danced and secreted understanding, albeit slightly wicked, humor. She loved her irascible father; they might tilt at each other and parry deft strokes for the sheer intellectual joy of the thing, but underneath her slim, proud beauty there functioned a brain as keen and hard as his own.

"You mean that Kerry Dale has turned down your proposition."

Old Simeon glared at her and waved the offending spacegram so violently it ripped in his fingers. "I offered to take him back into my service as a lawyer," he shouted. "I offered to forget that dirty trick he pulled on me about the colliding asteroids that cost me over a hundred thousand dollars. I even hinted that within a year or so he might succeed that dithering ass, Roger Horn, as Chief of my Legal Department. I mentioned delicately I'd tear up that contract he signed when drunk obligating him to eight more months of cargo-toting on my ships."

"Which was very sweet of you," murmured Sally, "considering that the said Mr. Dale had already wangled a general release out of you."

"Don't interrupt, child," snapped her father. He returned to his grievance—the torn, fluttering spacegram in his hand. "Yet what do you think he had the didgosted effrontery to reply?"

"I have a faint idea; but tell me, anyway."

"He says—confound him—he doesn't want a job. With me, or with anyone else. He's doing quite well on his own; and he expects to do even better. However, if I'd be willing to associate with him as an equal partner in some ventures he has in mind, he might consider me."

Old Simeon paused for breath. His blue eyes glared with baleful incongruity in the mild-mannered frame of his visage. "Me!" he choked. "Me, Simeon Kenton, being offered an equal partnership by a babe in arms, a puling young whelp!" His very beard seemed to quiver and grow electric at the enormity of the thought.

Then suddenly he stopped and grinned. It was an impish, waggish grin. "Not at least," he amended, "until I've licked him and taken him down a peg or two."

"That might take a long time," Sally pointed out. "He won the first round over you, and he might just as well take the sec-

ond and the third. I think, dad, his proposition isn't such a bad idea at that."

"Not a bad idea?" yelled Simeon. "It's a superlatively atrocious idea! Har-rumph! I grant you he knows law, but he's still a young snipperwhipper. Just because he took advantage of some obscure sections of a coff-eaten mode—I mean a mode-eaten coff—oh, ding it, you know what I mean—to steal my hard-earned money from me is no reason for this new fond-counded impudence of his. Partner! Bah! And bah again!"

"And triple bah!" agreed Sally. "Nevertheless, suppose this same impudent young man decides to take his proposition, whatever it is, to Jericho Foote? You know Jericho. He'll very likely take him up on it, just to annoy you."

"That rubbled-dyed Venusian swamp snake!" said Simeon incredulously. "*He* take up with Kerry Dale? Impossible! Dale is too—"

"Sensible?" Sally finished for him. "That's what I've been saying right along. But if you turned him down—"

Her father calmed suddenly. "You love him, don't you?"

"Yes," she said. Being her father's daughter she never evaded an issue. "And I expect to marry him some day, whether he knows it now or not."

Looking at her, old Simeon could well believe it. No young man could long resist his slim, calm-eyed young daughter. He went to her and kissed her. His voice softened. "He's got the right stuff in him, Sally, in spite of his whangdoodled brashness. But his head's liable to grow too big for him if he gets what he wants too easily. Let him fight the hard way for success; the way I did. Let him fight me, if necessary; it will do him good. And I'll fight him back, tooth and nail. If he wins through, I want him to win on his own, and not because his future father-in-law made the way easy."

Sally nodded thoughtfully. Then a gay smile made a sunburst of her countenance. "All right, dad. Go ahead and get in your dirtiest licks. But don't mind if I root for the other side."

"I won't." He flicked the telecaster into life. He scowled at the communications operator. "Take a spacegram," he roared. "Addressed to Kerry Dale, Planets, Ceres. 'Your impudent proposition doesn't even merit turning down. My own proposition withdrawn. Sent merely out of pity. Wash my hands of you. Expect presently to wash my hands *with* you. Kenton.'

"There, that will hold him. Now we'll see what stuff he's made of." He turned grinning toward his daughter. But Sally was no longer there. She had slipped silently out of his office.

A frown replaced the grin. The bluster died. No longer was he master of men; only an anxious parent. He shook his head; screwed up his face in thought.

He returned to the telecaster, and connected with the Earth-Mars Navigation offices. The clerk recognized him. "Good morning, Mr. Kenton," he said obsequiously. "What may we do for you?"

"When's the next ship leaving for Planets?"

"This evening, sir, at 9:45. The *Erebus* blasts off from Cradle No. 4, sir."

"Good. Make one reservation for me. Under the name of John Carter. I don't want my presence on board known."

"Of course. We'll be most happy to take care of it for you. You wish Suite A, naturally, sir. It's the very best—"

But he was talking to a blank screen.

The *Erebus* was the luxury liner of the spaceways. One thousand feet long it was, its hardened *dural* hull gleaming like silver in the powerful floodlights. Its equipment was the last word and its appointments luxurious. It carried first-class passengers only and express packages of small bulk but high value.

The usual crowd of loungers, friends and relatives gathered on the brightly illuminated rocket field to see the *Erebus* off. The last warning signal had been given. The visitors trooped down the gangplank over the open struts of the cradle in which the mighty ship pointed its nose slantingly toward the stars.

People waved outside. The passengers stood within the observation deck, securely quartzed in, waving back.

Then the protective shields whirred into place, cutting off sight for the blast-off. The field crew moved toward the gangplank, ready to swing it away.

A small aerocab shot like a bat out of hell across the field, thrust out landing gear and scattered the crowd headlong before its slithering stop. The car hadn't come to a halt before the cabby had flung to the ground, snatched at a single lightweight bag with one hand and swung at the door with the other. But his passenger, a girl with wind-blown locks and hasty traveling costume, had already sprung lightly out.

"Yell for them to hold it," she cried impatiently. "Don't worry about me."

The crowd growled, resentful of the narrow escape. "Who the hell does she think she is?" squeaked a burly roustabout. "Almost running us down like we were—"

"Hold the ship!" bellowed the cabby. "Miss Kenton's coming on board."

The ground crew had the gangplank swinging wide. The foreman jumped at the name as if he had been blasted. He bellowed in turn. The long steel slant jerked, moved back into place. The growls of the crowd gave way to straining of necks, excited comments. The roustabout stopped in midflight, gulped and retreated hastily into the protective anonymity of his fellows.

But Sally was too used to gapings and respectful murmurs to pay any attention. She was running with lithe swiftness toward the ship; the cabby puffing behind her.

"We didn't know," apologized the foreman.

She favored him with a quick smile. "Neither did I," she told him and vanished into the reopened port.

The foreman was dazzled. The girl had gone, but the smile remained with him, to be treasured and brought out again and again for inspection. He even foolishly boasted of it to his

stout, work-roughened wife that night while swallowing a midnight meal. And regretted it for days thereafter. For his wife had a jealous heart and a blistering tongue; and she brooked no rivals.

The harried and obsequious purser was having a rough time of it.

"If we had only known you were taking passage," he wailed, "I would without question have reserved Suite A for you, Miss Kenton. But you see—"

Sally stamped a trim, determined foot. She pretended indignation. "I don't see. Why, pray, may I not have Suite A?"

"It's already occupied. It was reserved only this morning. By a Mr. John Carter."

"And who the devil is this Mr. Carter that he rates the only decent suite on board this ship?"

The purser thought unhappily of the really luxurious quarters he had shown this imperious young lady and which she had turned down. He didn't realize that under her indignant-seeming exterior she was enjoying herself hugely. Unknown to old Simeon, she had returned to his private office while he was packing, and found the telautotyped plate of her father's reservation under the name of Carter. It took her ten seconds then to make up her mind to board the same ship to Ceres; it took her rather more time to throw a sufficiency of clothes together in a bag.

"I don't know who he is," confessed the purser, "but he seems a most irascible old man. Almost blasted me out of the room when I stopped in very courteously to ask him if he required anything."

Sally smiled at this unflattering description of her father; hastily shifted the smile to a frozen stare.

"Then get him out. Give him another room—five other rooms, for all I care. I want Suite A."

The purser was desolate. "I'd be glad to do anything in my power; but you haven't seen this man. He'd bite my head off if I asked him anything like that. And, after all, the Space Code says specifically—"

"Bother the Space Code! If you're so frightened of this fellow, I'll speak to him myself. Take me to him."

The automatic elevator dropped them to Deck 3; the moving catwalk sped them toward Suite A. The purser surreptitiously mopped his brow. These rich dames, who thought they owned the Universe!

His discreet buzz was answered by a blast from the annunciator.

"Come in!"

The annunciator distorted the voice; but it couldn't mask the impatient rasp to it. The purser shut his eyes and muttered a hasty prayer. There'd be sparks flying when these two met. He wished himself anywhere else but at this particular spot.

The door whirred open; and they stepped in.

It *was* a beautiful suite; there was no question of that. The walls were photomuraled on receptive metal to give the effect of smiling fields backdropped by snow-capped mountains. The ceiling appeared an open sky in which glowed innumerable worlds. Couches nestled around a central bath of artificial flame. Open doors disclosed twin bedrooms and a bathing pool filled with activated waters.

A man's back bent away from them. He was seeking a book in the recessed shelves.

"Can't I get peace and quiet even out in space?" he grumbled. "What the devil do you want now?"

"I want this suite," said Sally in a throaty, altered voice. "And I want it in a hurry. I'll give you exactly five minutes to pack and get out."

The purser was horrified. "Now please—" he started in protest.

But the man had jerked erect and pivoted on them. He was furious. His wispy white hair bristled with electric anger. "Give *me* five minutes! Why, you impertinent—"

His jaw dropped ludicrously. "Sally!" he shouted. "In the name of all the blink-eyed comets, what are you doing here?"

She kissed him. "Suppose I ask *you* the same question? You know you're subject to vertigo."

The purser's eyes goggled. Simeon Kenton! Old Fireball himself! Father and daughter. He fled before this strange, incomprehensible pair could turn on him.

"Don't be silly," old Simeon said indignantly. "You can't have vertigo in space. Everything's up."

Sally shook her finger at him. "No evasions, please."

He cleared his throat. "Har-rumph! I'm going to Planets. A business deal, my dear. Something that came up suddenly."

"A business deal?" she echoed meaningly. "Now confess!"

"Yes, a business deal!" he returned heatedly. "And furthermore—" He stopped short. He glared. "Never mind about me. What the ding-ding about *you*?"

She patted his cheek. "I'm on the same business deal that you are, most reverend parent. Only I bet I thought of it first."

Then the humor of it struck them simultaneously, and they laughed until the tears came and their voices were weak.

"We're both dadgusted fools!" cried Simeon. "Only I'm the older one. Very well, I'll talk to that uppity snipperwhapper. But first I'm going to take all his ill-gotten gains away from him. He needs taking down a peg; otherwise you'll find there'll be no living with him."

"I still bet on him, dad. I have an idea he won't be so easy to take down."

"That remains to be seen," Simeon said grimly. "The first time he just caught me off guard."

Sally pressed the buzzer. The purser appeared, haggard, defeated.

"Move my bag in here," she ordered. "Into the bedchamber next to the pool."

"Y-yes, Miss Kenton. Y-yes, Mr. Kenton. I didn't know—"

"And why didn't you know?" yelled Simeon. But the purser had fled again.

CHAPTER 5

THEY DIDN'T find Kerry Dale at Planets. In the twelve days of their journey to that roaring boom town on the edge of the Asteroid Belt the bird had flown the coop. Flustered officials scurried to bring the mighty Simeon Kenton information.

"Young Kerry Dale? Yes, sir, he blasted off four Earth-days before. In what? Why . . . uh . . . seems like the young fellow bought himself an old tramp freighter and fitted it out for salvage operations. Incorporated himself, in fact, under the laws of Ceres. Mighty flexible and generous, our corporation laws, sir. Nothing like those of Earth and Mars. Initial fees nominal, sir, and the taxes practically nothing."

The official permitted himself a respectful wink. "We don't believe in pestering business. Nothing paternal about us—ha, ha. If Mr. Kenton would care to look into the advantages of transferring his affairs to Ceres, we'd be most happy to discuss—"

"Stop your infernal chattering" roared Simeon. "I don't give a tail-ringed hoot about your silly laws. I'm asking simple questions and I want simple answers."

"Y-yes, sir," stammered the frightened official. Old Fireball certainly lived up to his reputation.

"Where did he go to?"

The records came out tremblingly. A long nose buried itself in the documents, lifted. "N-no destination, sir. Just cruising through the Asteroid Belt. Under the articles of incorporation, Space Salvage, Inc. does not have to file the port of call of its vessel at the time of blasting off. Hm-m-m! A very peculiar charter, sir. There are lots of clauses in it I've never seen before. We're pretty free and easy about those things, but not *that* much. I'm surprised our law experts passed it."

You don't know Mr. Kerry Dale," smiled Sally.

The Kentons went back to their hotel—the single good one in the rushing, roaring, enclosed city of Planets.

"Har-rumph!" observed old Simeon. "We seem to have come on a wild-goose chase. Salvage, indeed! Piracy, more likely. He'll starve to death trying to find salvage work from here to Jupiter. There ain't many ships out and most o' them's mine. And *my* captains just don't let their ships break down. They know better. Oh, well, a fool and his ill-gotten gains 're soon parted. We might as well go home, child."

Sally's eyes felt queer and blurry. What was the matter with her? Here she was acting like any silly schoolgirl; literally throwing herself at the head of a young man whom she had seen only once and who didn't care a hoot about her. She had sent him a spacegram and he hadn't even the decency to acknowledge it. She had tossed decorum to the winds and rocketed to Planets, and he was gone. Her father was right! He was a fool; an egotistic, self-centered fool. She'd show him! She'd go right back and forget—

"I'm staying here, dad," she said aloud, miserably aware of her illogic.

"You're a rubble-dyed idiot, daughter," snorted Simeon.

"And if you want to make a blasted show of yourself, go ahead. As for me, I'm going—"

They were moving across the soft-padded lobby of the hotel. A man was registering at the scanning booth. The scanner printed his picture and other pertinent data and transferred it to the photoelectric cells guarding the panel of the room to which he had been assigned.

He turned as they came up. His eyes wavered on the Kentons, smiled palely and slid past them.

Simeon stopped short. "Jericho Foote!"

Explosive contempt seared his voice. "What the devil is a slimy Venusian swamp snake like yourself doing out here in Planets?"

Jericho Foote, President of Mammoth Exploitations and old Simeon's chief rival, blinked at him sideways. He never looked any man straight in the face. His black hair was smoothed sleekly over a low forehead. His nose was pinched and brief, his lips bloodless and thin. His smile went underground and his face darkened.

"Some day I'll have the law on you for your slanderous tongue, Kenton," he said with a scowl.

"Run to the law and be damned! I asked you a question."

"It's none of your business," snapped Foote and went hastily past them.

Sally stared thoughtfully after him. "He must have come on the *Erebus* with us. In secret, too. His name wasn't on the passenger list and he kept to his quarters. Maybe my hunch was right, dad. When you turned Kerry Dale down, perhaps he teamed up with Foote."

"Then he teamed up with a skulking leohippus," growled Simeon. He began to walk quickly toward the scanning booth.

"What are you going to do?"

"Har-rumph! Register, of course. When skullduggery's afoot, Simeon Kenton's not the man to run away. Come on, Sally."

The misnamed *Flash* rolled and wallowed in space and made loud, complaining noises every time the rockets jetted. It was a tub, rusty and dingy with long years of service, and the odors of suspicious freights clung to the interior in spite of thorough scrubbings. The tubes were out of line and gave a wobbling motion. The struts quivered and groaned. The motors pounded and clanked unceasingly. The heavens gyrated in sympathy and the stars danced little, erratic jigs every time Kerry Dale glued his eyes to the observation telescope.

Yet he was inordinately proud of his craft; as proud as if she had been a swift, sleek racer capable of a thousand miles a second. He owned her—every rusted bolt of her; every squeak and rattle. He was no longer a penniless young lawyer out of a job; he was a man with vested property rights; President and total Board of Directors of Space Salvage, Inc. True, he had sunk practically every cent he had in this old scow, and business so far had been exactly nil. That didn't matter. Something was bound to turn up. His nimble wits would see to that. Good Lord—the Asteroid Belt was full of opportunities. If it wouldn't be one thing, it would be another. He had drawn his charter with infinite care. There were dozens of vague, rambling clauses in it that had meant nothing to the law experts of the Ceres Filing Bureau; but which in a pinch could cover any contingency. He could conduct salvage operations, own and operate mines, take title to stray asteroids, barter, trade with and sell to any natives he might find on the various planets and satellites; and in general, as he had thoughtfully inserted, "do any and all things which a natural person might do, not contrary to law."

Which, as Jem admiringly observed, practically gave Kerry the right to commit murder—in his corporate entity, of course.

Jem was his second in command. He had a last name—it appeared on articled indentures, on certain police records scattered over space—but none of his intimates knew what it was. Everyone called him Jem and nothing else. When Kerry had

quit his menial labors as cargo wrestler on the *Flying Meteor*, a Kenton freighter, because of a certain general release he had cannily extracted from Old Fireball, Jem, who had been his foreman and superior, had quit with him. Even in the hold of the *Flying Meteor*, Jem had humbly admitted Kerry's superiority, and he had jumped at the chance to throw in his fortunes with the brilliant, resourceful young lawyer.

Right now, however, Jem was a bit doubtful of the wisdom of his course. He had dropped a good job, with a steady, assured income and prospects of promotion, for a harebrained, crazy adventure. He wasn't accustomed to spaceships that rolled as though they were old-fashioned watercraft plunging through stormy seas. It made him space-sick. And every time the rusted plates squeaked and complained, he involuntarily looked around for the nearest safety boat.

"Besides," he told Kerry, continuing his growsing monologue, "where 're we getting at? Nowhere, says I." He stared resentfully out at the wobbly heavens. "We've scooted out o' the reg'lar lanes o' the Belt. We aint even headin' toward Jupeeter. If you could hold this blamed tub steady for half a minute, you'd see Jupeeter way the hell an' gone over to the right."

"Right!" Kerry agreed cheerfully. "If we're looking for salvage, we've got to keep away from the regular space lanes. The big outfits have their own patrol boats there. Kenton and Mammoth and Interworld and the rest. There 're no pickings for us on the lanes. But out here, if a ship gets into trouble, it would take weeks to raise up help, and that's where we come in."

"Yeah!" grumbled Jem, squinting at the solitudes that surrounded them outside the glassite observation port. "*If* there was a ship, and *if* she was in trouble. We ain't seen or raised another boat in these god-forsaken wastes for over a week."

The *Flash* shifted course and drove forward like a slightly

indecisive corkscrew. The starboard rockets thundered and drew protesting cries from the very bowels of the craft.

Jem winced and a terrible thought grew on him. "Say-y-y! That there thing works both ways."

"What do you mean?"

"About this here salvage business. S'pose *we* bust down. And I ain't saying it ain't mighty likely. Who's gonna save *us*?"

Kerry grinned. "Let's not worry about that until it happens. The *Flash* is fundamentally sound. Underneath her rust and creaky joints she's got a heart of gold. She'll outlive a hundred fancier, shinier ships."

But as the *Flash* drove on and on, far beyond the usual lanes, Kerry began to grow anxious. The hurtling, crisscrossing asteroids became fewer and fewer. Mars was a tiny point of light behind and Jupiter itself lost magnitude on the right. They were driving at an angle of sixty degrees to that giant planet. Space enfolded them, huge, unfathomable, frightening.

Sparks sat patiently at the open visiscreen, waiting for messages that never came. The limited range of their apparatus forbade the reception of signals from the distant traveled courses; and not even a stutter came in from the fifty-million-mile radius of effective reach. They had this sector of space, seemingly, all to themselves.

For the hundredth time Kerry took out a well-thumbed sheaf of three spacegrams, reread them. He always read them in the same order. It was something of a ritual.

The first was the offer from Simeon Kenton to rehire him, with the tempting bait of eventual Chief of Legal Department hinted at. It was a most satisfying spacegram, even though he had turned down the offer. So Old Fireball, who hadn't even known of his existence while he had slaved loyally as an obscure member of the legal staff of Kenton Space Enterprises, now was sufficiently aware of his worth to make him a flatter-

ing proposal. And all because he had hornswoggled the old man with his tricky knowledge of the law.

The second spacegram was also from old Simeon. This was the yelping insult to his own refusal. He grinned over it. He could read the wounded, incredulous vanity under the violent phrases. The man of power had called him impudent. Well, he *had* been impudent. Deliberately so. The memory of that year of unrewarded toil still rankled, and the cavalier treatment he had received when he asked for a raise. He'd never be subordinate again; to Kenton or to anyone else. They'd treat him as an equal or he'd go on his own. A lone wolf, pitting his wits and skill against the men of power and money. They had sought to use his wits and skill at law for their own benefit. They had thought to suck him dry and then cast him aside. Well, he'd show them. He'd—

He paused over the third spacegram. Slowly he read it, though he knew every letter of it by heart. "Kerry Dale, Planets, Ceres," it read. "Congratulations. Keep up the good work!" And the signature was Sally Kenton!

He remembered only too clearly the stupefaction with which he had received it. He had just mulcted her father out of a cool hundred thousand. The ordinary daughter would have been furious at the man who had done it.

Yet she had sent him these extraordinary congratulations. Why? His heart gave a great bound—and subsided. He became angry with himself. He was a fool to believe she meant it; that she had a certain personal interest in him. How could she? There was something else behind it. Something devious; something to her father's interest. Well, if they thought they could overreach him, they were both mightily mistaken.

Nevertheless he placed that particular spacegram very gently back in his pocket, taking care not to crease or dirty it in any way.

He went down into the radio room. Jem was lounging there, looking glum and talking to Sparks. All radio men ran to a pat-

tern. They were slight and wiry and dried-out and birdlike in the brightness of their eyes and the quickness of their movements. This particular Sparks was no exception.

"How 're they coming?" asked Kerry.

Sparks shook his head with rapid denial. "Nary a thing, Mr. Dale. Not even a code message from some lovesick matey to the gal he left behind in every port of call. Not a whisper. If I didn't check the tubes regular, I'd think the blamed machine was out o' kilter."

"I say we oughta turn back," declared Jem vehemently. "This here salvage business ain't what it's cracked up to be."

"Maybe not," agreed Kerry. "But I was thinking of other fish to fry."

"What?" they chorused.

Kerry hesitated. "Well, I had wanted to keep the idea to myself until something turned up." He grinned wryly. "But nothing's turned up, so it doesn't matter now."

"We ain't even turned up a space mirage," grunted Jem.

"The regular asteroid lanes are pretty well covered by now," explained Kerry. "Even bits of debris not more than a few yards in diameter are staked out, filed and exploited. The first space rush is over. The original prospectors are drinking away their gains or they're dead; the big outfits moved in, took them over and put exploration on a systematic, fine-comb basis. But this patch of space hasn't been gone over much. I thought perhaps we'd run into a find. Something like that nickel-iron asteroid that brought Kenton almost six millions in cash."

"So that's it, huh?" snorted Jem disgustedly. "We come out here wild-goosing for treasure. That's even wuss than hunting for distressed ships to salvage where there ain't no ships. Sometimes a boat *does* go off course and gets into trouble. But y'oughta knowed there ain't any asteroids out in this part o' space. There's the reg'lar belt and there's the Trojan belt way the hell an' gone off to one side, what belongs to Jupeeter. But

this here place where we're now ain't neither one nor t'other."

"So I'm finding out," Kerry admitted. He shrugged his shoulders. "Well, I can't be blamed for trying. Especially when I got word there was a Kenton ship nosing around these parts looking for the same thing I was."

"What?" they both yelled. "A Kenton ship?"

"How d'you know?" demanded Sparks. "They keep those exploration boats pretty quiet."

"Oh," said Kerry airily, "a few drinks of *pulla* back on Planets and a second mate who'd never drunk it before. Just before he passed out he said something about blasting off the next day under sealed orders. Seems a half-crazed prospector had been picked up in midspace by a Kenton ship. He died before they came into port and the captain screened Old Fireball for orders. When Kenton heard what the ravings had been about, he told the captain to dump the body into space and keep quiet."

"The old man's still on his toes," Jem's tone was admiring. "He don't let nothing slip by."

Kerry said dismally, "I gave them a day's start, thinking I could keep them in sight. But they were speedier than I thought. Oh, well, it doesn't matter. I suppose they didn't find anything, either. They must have turned back."

"Like we should."

"Might as well, Jem. We're beginning to run short on fuel and provisions. Better tell the engineer—"

"Hey, what's that?" yelled Sparks suddenly.

A faint wisp of sound wavered from the open screen; and a pale shadow danced like a quaking aspen over the white expanse.

"It's a message," cried Kerry excitedly. "Step up the power."

Sparks stepped up the power, but neither sound nor shadow gained in clarity.

"Hell!" said Sparks, disgusted. "It's a private wave length. Nothing for us."

"That's what *you* think," retorted Kerry. "Can't you get on that length?"

"I could; but I ain't."

"Why not?"

"It's against the law to listen in on private lengths. Says so in the regulations. I got 'em right here."

"Suppose as owner I order you to."

"Still wouldn't do it, Mr. Dale," Sparks answered doggedly. "It'd be worth my license. And besides, I don't aim to go breaking no laws."

Kerry grinned approval. "Good for you, Sparks. Glad to hear you talking that way. As a lawyer I don't believe in breaking laws. But there's no law against interpreting the law so it swings to your side."

"The rule about listening in is plain as can be," insisted Sparks. "There never was no getting round it."

"Oh, no? On the 6th of November, 2273, Chief Justice Clark, sitting in the Supreme Court of Judicature for the Planetary District of the Moon, handed down a unanimous decision in the case of Berry, plaintiff-appellee, versus Opp, defendant-appellant, covering an exactly similar situation.

" 'The law,' he wrote, 'is not an inelastic instrument. It may be stretched on occasion to mete out substantial justice in cases where the march of time or the failure of the legislature to provide for all contingencies has vitiated the plain intent of the specific provisions. The appeal in the instant case comes within the broad equities of such interpretation. It is true that Section 348 of the Space Code is specific in its wording and provides for no exceptions. But it must be asked, what was the intent of the Interplanetary Commission? Obviously to safeguard individuals and corporations from any encroachment on the right of privacy. A private wave length, officially registered, is as much a private right, as any primitive telephone, wire, or stamped and sealed letter.' "

Kerry took a breath and plunged on while his audience of two just goggled.

" 'Nevertheless,' " he continued quoting, " 'consider the facts. The appellee's ship was in distress on the Earth-Moon run. A leak had developed. It was losing air fast. The ship operator sent out a signal of distress. In his excitement, he sent it on the private length assigned to the appellee, instead of on the standard wave. The defendant-appellant, also on the Earth-Moon run, noted through his telescope the erratic course of the appellee's ship. He heard the faint buzz of the private message. Assuming that an emergency had arisen, and acting in good faith, he tuned in on the private length. He heard the call for help and hurried to the rescue. He saved the ship and saved its crew from death by asphyxiation.

" 'Now the plaintiff, in defiance of all gratitude, sues the defendant for infringement of Section 348. Judicial notice may be taken by this Court that the purpose of the plaintiff is to offset and preclude a pending claim for salvage on the part of the defendant. The plaintiff does not come into court with clean hands. The Legislative never intended this section to cover such a manifest perversion of justice. It is plain that the question of good faith must be involved. The defendant acted in good faith. The judgment of the lower Court in favor of the plaintiff-appellee must accordingly be reversed, and judgment rendered for the defendant-appellant, and costs assessed in his favor in the lower Court and on appeal.' "

Kerry took another breath. "You will find the decision reported in the Interplanetary Reporter, Volume 991, Pages 462 to 478 inclusive."

Sparks gulped. "You ain't ribbing me, sir?"

"If Mr. Dale tells it to you," Jem said severely, "it's so, down to the last dotting of the i's."

"But . . . but I ain't ever heard o' that," Sparks still protested. "And according to what you say, that there judge wrote that more'n a hundred years ago."

"Sure it's an old case, and of course you never heard of it. Even among lawyers very few have. The precise matter just never happened to come up again. But it's there, and it's law. It's never been overruled."

Sparks shook his head. "I still don't see—"

"The whole point is one of good faith. We hear a call out in the veritable wilds of space. There shouldn't even be a ship out here. Suppose, say we, that ship's in trouble. Suppose the operator lost his head, the same as the fellow did in that old case of Berry versus Opp. We listen in, just to make sure. All in good faith. After we've heard enough to know we've made a mistake, that he's *not* in trouble, we cut off."

A wide grin split Jem's face. "And meanwhile we can't help it if we heard things. Kerry Dale, you've got a head on your shoulders."

"We-ell!" said Sparks, half-convinced.

"Hurry up!" Kerry was getting impatient. "They'll be off the waves before you get around to it."

Five minutes later Sparks was wiping his brow. "Damned if it *ain't* a distress call," he said huskily. "That's the *Flying Meteor*, Captain Ball commanding."

"Holy cats!" exclaimed Jem. "My old ship! What's Ball doing all the way out here?"

"*Our* old ship," corrected Kerry. His face wore a thoughtful frown. "Iron Pants Ball doesn't lose his head so easily. He's trying to raise Planets or some other Kenton ship instead of sending out a general call. Why?"

"He ain't even sending on his regular equipment," said Sparks. "He's using an assembled rig. I can tell from the power. Something happened to his sending outfit. Smashed. And he's drifting. Fuel tanks clean. He ain't saying what's happened. Funny!"

"Damn funny!" nodded Kerry. "Well, boys, this is obviously

a job for Space Salvage, Inc.; even though Ball isn't asking. Have you got his position?"

"Yeah. Shall I contact him and tell him we're coming?"

"No. I want to surprise him."

Jem chuckled. "And what a surprise! He'll be fit to bust when he sees us two."

But Kerry's frown had deepened.

"Get the engineer to shove on full speed ahead, Jem," was all he said.

CHAPTER 6

IT TOOK the better part of a day, Earth time, to make the run. The *Flash* was no speed demon, and she complained and whined and groaned vociferously at the treatment she was being accorded. But Kerry kept pushing her grimly. His thoughts he kept to himself.

The *Flying Meteor* had stopped sending. "Used up their emergency batteries," Sparks explained.

Space was quiet, except for the roar of their own tubes. The detectors picked up a small asteroid, too small and too distant as yet for sight in the electro-scanners. It seemed about equidistant from the crippled ship and their own. The rest of space was swept clean. Nothing for a hundred million miles.

The *Flying Meteor*, when it hove into sight, was drifting helplessly. Slowly, at less than a mile a second; silent, its hull dim in the faint reflection from a far-off sun.

The *Flash* came up fast. Kerry opened the screen, put through a call.

No answer.

Sparks whistled. "They haven't a drop of juice left. Not even

for local reception. I never heard of that happening before. There's something screwy."

But Kerry was already pouring his long legs into a space suit.

"Hurry, Jem," he said. "Get into yours. You and I are going visiting."

More than thirty precious minutes were consumed in maneuvering into position and cutting down speed to get alongside. The magnetic tractors went into action. The two ships drifted together. There was a slight bump, and the plates gripped.

Kerry and Jem clumped into the air chamber, closed the lock behind them, slid open the outer port. Jem tapped out the Space Code signal on the hull of the *Flying Meteor*. For a moment there was no answer.

"I hope they're not dead," he said with sudden anxiety. "They used to be my shipmates. There was—"

Then the taps came. "Stand by! We're opening. Manual power. No juice left."

Helmeted, rubber-sheathed men met other spacesuited individuals. Air whooshed in between. They were in Captain Ball's quarters, shrugging out of unwieldy outfits, shutting out with swift door-closing the staring, haggard crew.

"I thought my number was up this time," came Ball's muffled voice as he lifted his helmet. "If your ship hadn't providentially come up—" He choked, stared.

"You, Jem! Kerry Dale, you!"

Jem's fingers touched his forehead from long habit. "Yes, sir." Then he grinned. "Sort of a surprise, ain't it, Captain Ball?"

Kerry said: "It's a small Universe, isn't it? You used to be on the Earth-Belt run; and we were fooling around Planets. Yet here we meet almost beyond Jupiter. Luckily for you, as it turns out. We're in the salvage business, you know. Jem and I."

Ball's eyes narrowed. "The coincidence is too damn pat. I've

been running into too many coincidences as it is."

"This one happens to be a lucky coincidence, captain," Kerry pointed out. "You do need salvage, don't you?"

Ball grimaced. "Can't help myself. My fuel tanks are bone dry, my radio's twisted junk. My emergency batteries are smashed. If I hadn't had one stowed away unnoticed among the medical supplies, I couldn't even have—" He stopped suddenly.

"You were saying?" Kerry murmured.

"Nothing." Ball's face tightened. "If you could let me have four drums of fuel and half a dozen spare batteries, so I can get started toward Planets and raise headquarters there, Kenton Space Enterprises will pay you well."

"You forget," Kerry said softly, "we're in the salvage business; not a refueling station."

"Damn it, man! You'll get your salvage fees. One third of the ship's value, isn't it? Mr. Kenton will pay, and gladly. I'll sign papers. Only give me the stuff—"

"One third of the cargo, too."

"All right. All right. But hurry and—"

So there's nothing of value in the cargo, thought Kerry. Then why this all-fired hurry? He shook his head.

"Sorry, captain. The laws of salvage are funny that way. No towing; no salvage. Read Section 21, Subdivision 6—"

"You're too damn technical. You know as well as I that if I say so, Kenton will back me up, law or no law."

"Still no sale."

Ball scowled. "Blast you, Dale, have it your way then. Haul me all the way to Planets. Only let me use your radio. I want to notify my base as to what's happened."

"Do you intend to use code, by any chance?" inquired Kerry.

The captain stared. "Naturally."

"Then still no sale. I have a strict rule on board my ship. No private wave lengths or private codes may be used on my instruments." He winked surreptitiously to Jem. "Haven't I, Jem?"

That worthy looked bewildered. "Huh? Oh, sure . . . sure! Uh . . . our Sparks, he's a funny guy thataway."

Ball said coldly: "You fellows aren't talking to a blasted landsman. Stop the nonsense and get down to brass tacks. What's your game?"

Kerry was equally cold and crisp. "That works both ways. What's *your* game, Captain Ball?"

"This is ridiculous!"

"Oh, it is, is it? Let me run over a few things with you. The *Flying Meteor* was taken from its regular run and blasted off under sealed orders. I find it adrift in a sector of space where no one ever goes."

"So you followed me, eh?"

Kerry ignored that. He ticked off his points like relentless hammer blows. "I repeat, I find you adrift. Your fuel is gone; your radio smashed. You might possibly have run out of fuel, though you're too good an officer to have permitted that. But you didn't smash your own radio or lose your spares. Someone else did that for you. If it was a highjacker, you'd have made no bones about telling us. Yet you're holding out. Why?"

Ball's face did not change so much as a muscle. It was a well-schooled face. "You're crazy!" he said.

Kerry shrugged. "All right, if that's the way you want it." He turned to Jem. "Come on, Jem. Captain Ball obviously doesn't wish for our assistance. Let's get back to the *Flash*. I want to investigate that asteroid which showed up on our detectors, anyway. Since we don't have to tow this tub—"

Ball lost his impassivity. "You mean you're going to let us drift out here like trapped animals?"

Kerry pretended astonishment. "Isn't that what you wanted? I thought it was, since you refuse to co-operate."

"You win, and be damned to you!" the captain said bitterly. "If there was any chance of getting through, I'd see you in hell first. But I can't let my men die like rats; and furthermore, it

doesn't matter, anyway. They've got a good three-day start and they've got a fast ship. Faster than mine; and certainly faster than yours."

"Ah!" said Kerry. "That's better. Now start from the beginning."

Ball took a deep breath. "Well, we *were* hunting for something. On a tip."

"Skip that part," Kerry advised. "I know about it. Did you find it; and what happened then?"

The captain stared. "Damn!" he said with feeling. "And we thought we were very secret about it. That makes two at least who knew."

"The other being—"

"Jericho Foote, the louse! You know—Mammoth Exploitations."

"Ah!" said Kerry again. "I know. The pot's beginning to boil. He followed you, too?"

"Not that swamp snake! He's too cunning to get tangled up directly. He hired an outfit; one of those that's always hanging around the Belt looking for trouble. I didn't know they were following until I located the asteroid. They kept out of range, using their detectors. They had extra-powerful ones."

"That asteroid you were hunting," said Kerry, "wouldn't by the merest chance be the one I just picked up in *my* detectors?"

Ball glowered. "I suppose so. There isn't another one around this side of Jupiter."

"And there you found what you were after?"

The captain hesitated.

"You might as well tell me. I'm going to take a look-see anyway."

Ball shrugged. "The whole Universe might as well know now. That poor, crazed prospector was right. It isn't a big one—not over five miles across. But she's just loaded with thermatite."

"Thermatite!" Kerry and Jem looked swiftly at each other. "What percentage alloy?"

"No percentage. It's the pure thing. And a vein as thick as a spaceship. There's been nothing like it found in the System. I think this asteroid must have come from outside. The head of a comet, possibly, caught by Jupiter."

Kerry whistled softly. Thermatite was almost pure energy. It would undergo atomic disintegration *without* giving off gamma rays—hence it could be used in very cheap, very light portable atomic engines that required no shielding. But what thermatite had so far been discovered was so alloyed with inert materials that the expense of extraction practically made up the difference. A vein of pure thermatite therefore meant a sizable fortune to the discoverer.

"What happened then?"

Dark anger lowered on the captain's face. "We had just staked out our claim when that damned pirate came up. We didn't have a chance. Practically my whole crew was out on the asteroid, unarmed; and they had a torpedo gun trained on us. There wasn't a thing we could do but curse and watch. They erased our monuments and raised their own; they took over whatever thermatite we had already mined, emptied our fuel tanks, smashed our radio and set us adrift."

"The dirty highjackers!" growled Jem. "They might as well have murdered you all and been done with it."

"Oh, no!" Ball said sarcastically. "They said as soon as they'd filed the claim properly in their own names they'd report us adrift and have Kenton send a rescue ship out for us."

"By which time you'd be dead, *if* they reported you at all," Kerry said grimly. "This Foote *is* a rat!"

"That's the layout. That's why I want to use your radio. I want to raise Planets and have them arrested before they file."

Kerry shook his head. "It would be your word against theirs. They would claim you tried to highjack *them*. Besides, my

radio has only a fifty-million-mile radius. By the time we'd get that close they'd already have filed."

The captain swore. He managed to concentrate a good deal into a few words. Jem just glowered.

Kerry thought a moment.

"You took enough observations to calculate the asteroid's orbital elements?"

"Naturally. Otherwise how would we be able to find her again; or file on her? It's quite an eccentric orbit, as you'd suspect from finding her all the way out here. I've never run into any quite like it before."

Kerry's eyes gleamed suddenly. "H-m-m! Mind if I look at your figures?"

"Damned if I know why you want to waste your time. We ought to get started for Planets right away." Ball's fists clenched. "I want to lay hands on a few people."

"There'll be no delay. Jem, get the tractors hitched up properly for towing. I'll be with you in a few minutes."

It was with reluctance that Ball brought out his charts. But there was nothing he could do about it. Kerry had the whip hand.

Kerry studied the charts in silence, made some rapid calculations. When he finally looked up his face was wiped clean of all emotion.

"I'm going to make you a proposition, Ball."

"What is it?"

"About the salvage. The *Flying Meteor* is a heavy boat as well as an expensive one. Towing her won't do my tractors or my hull any good. It's worth every bit of the salvage money. And that's going to run high. One third of your ship's value, and you know what that amounts to."

The captain grimaced. "What can I do? I'm in a tight spot."

Kerry stared up at the ceiling. "You've lost out on the asteroid. Foote's gang will file, and then assign to him. He'll show a check in payment and claim his rights as an innocent

purchaser for value. Whatever proceedings you might have against the highjackers would be lost against him. You couldn't prove in a court of law that they were his men."

"N-no," Ball admitted. "I suppose not. I damn well know it, but I couldn't prove it."

"Exactly. And by the time we get back, they'll have vanished. There 're plenty of hide-outs among the asteroids where they can hole up until the storm blows over."

"What are you driving at?"

Kerry met his gaze. "This. I'm going to do you a favor; and Old Fireball, your boss, a favor. Though God knows I have no reason to waste favors on him. I'm going to tow you to port gratis, free, and waive the salvage charges."

Ball came halfway out of his chair. "What?"

"In return for something, naturally. There's got to be consideration for a bargain, you know; otherwise the law holds it to be of no effect."

Ball sank back. "Ha! I see!"

"You don't. All I want is a proper assignment from you, as initial discoverer and authorized agent of Kenton Space Enterprises, Unlimited, of all your right, title and interest in and to the said asteroid, duly described, and of all the appurtenances thereto attached."

Suspicion flared in the captain's eye. "You mean you want to take an assignment of something that is valueless?"

"I don't say it's wholly valueless," Kerry said carefully. "I don't want to misrepresent. I think I can get a nuisance value out of the claim. I'm a lawyer, you know."

"And a good one, captain," Jem chimed in heartily.

The suspicion died in Ball. He even grinned. This Kerry Dale, smart as he thought he was, was a fool. Giving up substantial salvage for a remote possibility. The law of filing on newly discovered asteroids was definite. Two steps were required. First, setting up the proper monuments on the asteroid. Second, filing the requisite affidavits in the Claims Office hav-

ing jurisdiction. In this case, Planets. One step alone was not sufficient. Prior monuments meant nothing; the date of filing controlled. Well, if Kerry Dale wanted to take a chance, who was he to stop him! In his mind's eye, Ball could hear old Kenton's approving chuckle. The old man was pretty sore over that last trick Dale had pulled on him.

"O. K.," he said. "Prepare the papers, and I'll sign them."

"*After* I take a look-see at the asteroid. I want to make sure your . . . uh . . . eyes didn't deceive you about that thermatite."

The captain grunted. "Suspicious, hey? Well, I suppose you're entitled to see for yourself."

There was no question about the thermatite. The quivering glow of it was visible a thousand miles away. It sparkled and danced with lambent flame along a wide streak in the dull, stony jaggedness of the tiny space wanderer.

"Satisfied now?" demanded Ball. The sight of that precious vein which was rightfully his by prior discovery embittered him all over again. Some day he'd get those birds!

"Looks all right. We're landing, though."

"Why?"

"To reset your monuments. Filing's no good without them, you know."

Let him have his fun, thought Ball sourly. Nuisance value, my eye! That skunk, Foote, won't pay him a nickel.

The ceremony didn't take long. Four metal stakes were driven deep into the stone, exactly in the niches where Ball's old ones had been ripped out. Then a photograving of claim to title was etched deep within the area bounded by the stakes. Meanwhile, Jem gleefully broke off the evidences left by the highjackers.

"Now," said Kerry, "we'll sign the documents. Here's a waiver of salvage, properly prepared, wherein I agree to tow

you into port and to accept in full payment thereof your assignment of rights in this asteroid. Please sign here."

For a moment the captain hesitated. This Kerry Dale was a pretty slick fellow. Did he have something up his sleeve? Hell, how could he? Sometimes the smartest fellows overreached themselves. With a little smile he signed.

Carefully Kerry folded the assignment, placed it in his pocket. The captain buttoned up *his* agreement with a sigh of satisfaction. "Let's get going," he said.

"Right. We start at once, Captain Ball. If you'll get back into the *Flying Meteor*—"

CHAPTER 7

ON THE *Flash*, Jem said anxiously: "I didn't want to say nothing, Kerry; but it 'pears to me you done yourself out of some healthy money."

Kerry grinned. "So does Ball. Well, we'll see. Meantime, tell the engineer to pull away." He thrust a paper into Jem's hand. "I've plotted our course. Give these figures to him."

Jem stared at them. He knew something about the elements of space navigation. His face showed stupefaction. "This here ain't right—" he exclaimed.

Kerry cut him short. "*I'm* the navigation officer on board, not you. Please follow orders." Then, with a smile, he patted Jem on the back. "Don't worry. I know what I'm doing."

Still bewildered, Jem went obediently below.

The lifting rockets spurted. The *Flash*, hitched firmly to the larger *Flying Meteor*, groaned in every strut. The tiny asteroid fell away. They swung a wide arc in space and moved steadily off. The asteroid dropped out of sight.

Kerry settled himself comfortably to await the expected explosion.

It was not long in coming!

About an hour later the visiscreen buzzed sharply. Kerry grinned. That would be Captain Ball. He had given him a single battery for his emergency rig; enough to establish communication between the two ships; but not nearly enough to raise anything outside of a few-thousand-miles range.

He opened the screen.

The captain's apoplectic countenance appeared. "Hey, Dale," he shouted, "where the hell are you going?"

"To port, of course. Where else?"

"You're either crazy, or no navigator. I've been watching the way we're heading this last hour. You'll never get to Planets on this course in a million years."

"Who said anything about Planets?"

Ball choked. "Well, I'll be— And where the hell *are* you going?"

"To Ganymede City, Ganymede, Sector of Jupiter. What's wrong with that?"

The captain's face was purple and green. He shook his fist. "What's wrong with that? Nothing, except that I want to go to Planets. If you don't turn at once—"

"What will happen?" Kerry asked softly.

"I'll have the law on you! Simeon Kenton will have the law on you! We'll break you so hard you'll never be able to pick up the pieces. We'll sue you for damages on the contract."

Kerry composed himself into a more comfortable position. "You mean that waiver of salvage I just signed?"

"I mean nothing else. You agreed to tow me to Planets."

"Look at it. If you'll find Planets mentioned once in there, I'll not only turn around but pay *you* salvage."

"Huh? Well . . . uh . . . maybe it isn't mentioned. That doesn't mean a thing. Any fool would know that's the port. That's where I came from; that's where *you* came from."

"I agreed to take you to port; and I'm taking you. Maybe you've forgotten, or maybe you never knew, but the Interplanetary Commission defined the word 'port' only about two

years ago. 'Port,' it said, 'in a contract of salvage, is to be construed as the nearest port of call to the place where the tow was commenced; it being understood, however, that the said point of entry is properly equipped with repair facilities sufficient to put the disabled tow into spaceworthy condition again. Surely, my dear captain, you don't deny that Ganymede City has proper repair docks? And certainly, if you'd look at your charts, you'd notice that we're a good fifty million miles closer to Ganymede City than to Planets."

Kerry put on a reproachful air. "Why, if I took you anywhere else I'd be guilty of a serious breach of contract; and Mr. Kenton would be perfectly within his rights in suing *me*."

"Damn your decisions and legal twistings!" roared Ball. "It was understood we were to go to Planets. Who the hell wants to go to Ganymede?"

"I do. I have business there. As for your understanding, I'm sorry you misunderstood. Naturally, if you were so keen on Planets you should have inserted it in the agreement."

Ball shook his fist again. "I'm coming on board to—"

"Not on my ship," Kerry answered cheerfully. "My space lock's jammed. I'm afraid I won't be able to fix it until we get to Ganymede. See you there."

He reached over and blanked the screen on the torrent of language that the harassed captain was letting loose.

Within a week they were on Ganymede, port of entry for the Jovian System, and capital of the Sector. Ganymede City was a frontier town, rough and sprawling and alive with adventurers come to seek their fortunes on the outskirts of civilization.

But Kerry wasted no time on its sordid delights. He went to the proper officials to transact the business he had in mind, and blasted off for Planets as soon as it was completed and his supplies were replenished.

Captain Ball, irascible, vowing vengeance, took off a day

after him. The first thing he had done, after being released from tow in the city's drydock, was to give orders to buy fuel for his tanks and to repair his radio. His next was to hasten to the police authorities to swear out a warrant against Kerry for breach of contract, kidnaping, forcible detainer and whatever else he could think of.

The police sent for Kerry. He came smilingly and stated his case. He exhibited his waiver; reached back of the official to take down a volume of the Interplanetary Commission's decisions, turned unerringly to the proper page and showed the text to him. The official read, looked impressed, and forthwith dismissed the case.

Ball stalked out, breathing vengeance. He hurried to the office of the Intersystem Communications System and sent off a long, blistering spacegram to Simeon Kenton, Megalon, Earth. He didn't know Simeon was on Planets. Then he rushed back to the drydock and lashed the repair men to a more furious gait.

Out in space, Jem said: "*Whew!* I never saw Captain Ball so mad before. He'll rip the insides of his ship getting to Planets ahead of us."

"Let him." Kerry was quite placid. "*I'm* in no hurry."

Jem shook his head. He was over his depth. There would be plenty of grief waiting for them on Ceres. Ball was hopping mad; Kenton would be hopping mad; and what Kerry had got out of it, he couldn't for the life of him see.

Planets rocked with excitement. There hadn't been so much excitement in that usually turbulent town since a section of the roofed inclosure had broken half a century before and exposed the population to the vacuum of space.

First a rakish craft had come into port, bearing all the marks of a long, fast journey. Tough-looking eggs had disembarked and hurried straight to the Claims Office. Filings were supposed to be confidential; but a clerk told a friend, who in turn

told another, and in six hours the whole town buzzed with the discovery of a wandering asteroid worth a couple of dozen millions.

Twelve hours later there was more news. Jericho Foote had filed an assignment of the claim to himself; and the strangers had blasted off hurriedly without bothering to attend to the necessary formalities attending ship departures. The same clerk started this bit of information rolling also.

Jericho Foote met reporters with a modest air. Yes, he *had* purchased the rights to an asteroid. Well, of course, there was supposed to be thermatite on it. How much? Maybe a couple of millions; it was hard to say. Did he know the strangers who had discovered it? No; never saw them before. But they had come to him with papers authenticating their find, and some samples. The assay showed 97.24 percent purity. They needed money in a hurry, and they offered the asteroid for sale. Why hadn't they gone to Simeon Kenton as well? A twisted smirk gloated on Foote's face. He didn't know; maybe it was because his reputation was better.

The reporters took this down and whistled under their breaths. When Old Fireball heard of this, there would be fireworks. Would Mr. Foote care to tell for publication what he had paid? Why, of course, boys. He showed them a canceled check, made payable to bearer. The check was for one hundred thousand dollars. He didn't tell them, naturally, that this was the price for highjacking Captain Ball.

When the news hit old Simeon, he was stunned. So stunned that for an unprecedented five minutes he lost all flow of language. Sally couldn't understand his reaction. He hadn't told her about the *Flying Meteor's* secret mission; nor that part of his reasons for coming to Planets had been to be on the spot for first news of the venture. She herself had wandered around the roaring town, feeling curiously empty and unsatisfied. Several weeks had passed and there had been no report from the salvage ship, *Flash*, nor from its owner-captain. Why she was

staying on she didn't know. Yet every time she determined to take ship back to Earth her will gave way and she weakly remained.

"Why, what's the matter, dad?" she exclaimed anxiously. She was alarmed over her father's sudden choked, empurpled silence. "Just because that man, Foote, hints his reputation is better than yours is no reason for you to risk apoplexy. Everyone knows—"

Simeon found part of his voice. "It isn't that, Sally," he said hoarsely. "It's about Ball and the *Flying Meteor*."

"What about them?"

He told her then; of the dying prospector and his half-delirious story, of the secret expedition of the *Flying Meteor*. "That there asteroid to which that swamp snake, Foote, got an assignment is the very same one that Ball went after. And Ball should 've been back by now. There's funny work afoot, and I mean Foote."

How funny the work was, showed up three days later in the form of a long spacegram from Ball on Ganymede City, relayed from Earth. There were two portions to the spacegram, and both of them unsealed all of the explosive possibilities that dwelt under Simeon's mild-seeming exterior.

Even Sally had never heard him go on like this. For a solid half-hour he coruscated and sizzled. His epithets were triumphs of twisted word compoundings. For five minutes he'd devote himself to the slimy, subterranean, hell-spawned Foote. Then, for five minutes more he'd devote himself with equal expertness to a certain ding-danged, balloon-headed, smart-alecky young feller by the name of Kerry Dale. Then he'd return to his characterizations of Foote.

Sally knew her father; knew it was no use to try and stop him when he was in this vein. Instead, she read the code spacegram that had touched him off. It spoke for itself. Hot fury assailed her at the first part; puzzlement at the second. It wasn't like

Kerry. From what she had seen of the young man he didn't do things out of sheer nastiness. Always he had gained by his tricks. His was a hard, realistic code of ethics; but so was her father's. They each recognized in the other an antagonist worthy of his steel; and secretly, she had no doubt, they admired and respected each other.

But this stunt of hauling the *Flying Meteor* to Ganymede instead of to Planets and thereby ruining whatever slim chance there might have been of bringing the highjackers to justice didn't make sense. Neither did his waiver of the substantial salvage fees to take up an assignment of a claim that he surely must have known wasn't worth a cent.

Old Simeon finished with a resounding burst of oratory that started curls of smoke in the cushioned sofa. He picked up his walking stick—a flexible, ornamented piece of duraluminum—shouted to his daughter: "Send a spacegram to Roger Horn to come here right away. Tell him to charter a boat; a whole fleet of boats, if necessary. It's about time that stuffed windbag starts to earn the fees I'm paying him." Then he was gone.

He met Jericho Foote in the hotel lobby, surrounded by reporters, still hot on the scent of the story.

"Oh, oh!" murmured one of them to his fellows. "Here comes Old Fireball and there's that certain look in his eyes. Watch this. It's going to be good."

How good it was going to be even the hardened reporters did not know.

Old Simeon moved swiftly through them, paying no attention as they scattered from his path. Jericho Foote rose to meet him. A slight alarm assailed him, but it passed. After all, there were plenty of witnesses around.

"Well, if it isn't Kenton!" he exclaimed. "You're looking—"

Simeon said nothing. He lashed out swiftly with his cane. It caught Foote on the shoulder. He staggered back, crying out. Simeon followed relentlessy. *Thwack! Swish! Crack!*

The cane whistled and sang about Foote's ears, slashed his

body, cut down his upflung arm, thumped across his back as he turned to flee. Foote screamed for help, yelled for mercy. But still the cane sang and danced. It was whispered later that the reporters did not interfere until Foote had been soundly and thoroughly beaten, and then only because, after all, they didn't want actual murder committed. They didn't like Foote.

Foote was carried to bed and Kenton sallied triumphantly into the street. Foote commenced action against Kenton for fifty thousand dollars for assault and battery with a dangerous weapon and intent of mayhem. Kenton counterclaimed for one hundred thousand dollars for slander and innuendo that his, Kenton's reputation wasn't all that it might be.

Planets rubbed its collective hands and looked forward with glee to a fine summer.

Roger Horn and Captain Ball arrived almost simultaneously; Horn puffing and gasping from the urgency of his call, the captain burning with desire for revenge against all and sundry.

Horn listened and hemmed and hawed. When the captain was through he looked worried. "Of course . . . hem . . . we have a good cause of action against these . . . haw . . . highjackers; if they can be found."

"To hell with them!" yelled Simeon. "I want you to get that asteroid back and get that Venusian swamp snake, Foote, in the bargain."

Horn cleared his throat. "Well, in the first place," he said judicially, "Captain Ball admits he can't prove in a court of law that these . . . hem . . . scoundrels were hired by Foote."

"I can't," growled Ball.

"Therefore, Foote is an . . . ahem . . . innocent purchaser for value, and whatever claim of forcible entry and detainer may be alleged against his . . . haw . . . sellers cannot be imputed to him."

"Dadfoozle it!" shouted Simeon. "I didn't need *you* to tell me that. Any law apprentice could 've told me the same thing. I'm paying you disgusting sums to tell me *how* to get things done, not why they *can't* be done. I'll bet that scaddlewagged Dale would 've—"

Horn winced. Damn Dale! He was sick and tired of hearing his name thrown in his false teeth every time. Then he brightened. He put on an air of dignity. "Speaking . . . ahem . . . of this . . . ah . . . young Dale, you lost whatever claim you might have had on the asteroid by assigning your rights to him. I have examined the document, Mr. Kenton, and I assure you it was properly drawn."

Simeon deflated. "Huh? Yeah—I suppose so." Then he, too, brightened. "Anyway, dadburn him! He outsmarted himself this time. Salvage would have amounted to over a hundred thousand. Instead, all he's got is a worthless assignment." He turned suddenly on Horn. "You're sure, though, it *is* worthless?"

"As sure as I am of anything. I'm willing to stake my reputation—"

"Huh!" Old Simeon's snort was plainer than words. "Then how about getting after him for towing Ball to Ganymede?"

"Well . . . hem . . . I'll have to consult my books—"

"You won't have to," Ball said bitterly. "Dale consulted them before he started. He found a decision which permitted him to head for the nearest port, which was Ganymede City. You'll find it, my dear Mr. Horn," he added with biting sarcasm, "in the Decisions of the Interplanetary Commission, Volume 53, Page 209."

"But why did he take you there?" demanded Sally. "He lost by it as well as you. Didn't you say he's on his way here now?"

"Yes; and I don't know, Miss Sally."

Old Simeon regained his elastic good humor. "Just pure spite, my dear," he chuckled. "He found out he'd made a fool-

ish bargain, and he took it out on the captain. After all, losing a hundred thousand in salvage would—"

A new voice sounded in the room.

"By this time, Mr. Kenton, you ought to realize I do nothing out of spite."

They all whirled. The door had opened silently.

"Kerry . . . Mr. Dale!" gasped Sally, surprised at the way her heart thumped. "When . . . when did you arrive?"

He looked leaner and fitter even than that single time she had seen him before. Space life agreed with him. He carried himself easily and there was a sureness about his movements and speech.

"About five minutes ago. I took an aerocab to beat the news. And just stick to Kerry. I like that better from your lips . . . Sally."

Simeon glared at him. "Har-rumph! You have a nerve coming to me after the dirty trick you played."

Kerry became curiously humble. "That's why I came, Mr. Kenton. I felt . . . uh . . . under the circumstances it was no more than right that I make you a proposition."

"I'm not interested in your propositions, dingblast you!"

"Wait till you hear it. I'm willing to give you half of my assigned rights in the asteroid provided you pay me the full salvage on the *Flying Meteor*."

Old Simeon chuckled. He was in high good humor. "You're slipping, son. I'm really disappointed in you. I thought you were a young man who knew his way about." He shook his head sadly.

Kerry pretended surprise. "I don't understand, sir. Half of that assignment is worth—"

"Exactly nothing. No, son. You were too smart for your own good. You dropped the salvage money and I'm going to hold you to it. A contract is a contract."

"That's your final word?"

"Absolutely. Business is business."

"Good!" Kerry's countenance cleared. "I confess I did feel a little conscicnce-stricken, but you yourself tell me business is business."

"What do you mean?"

Kerry grinned. "Captain Ball may remember I checked the elements of that little asteroid before I offered to waive the salvage."

"Come to the point."

"The point is simple. Asteroid X is not, as everyone hastily assumed, a member of the Asteroid Belt. It's really a Trojan asteroid, though an unusual one. For, while it fulfills the classic conditions of the Trojan group in that it moves along a stable orbit which is equidistant from both Jupiter and the sun, it lies apart from the ones we have hitherto known—such as Hector, Nestor, Achilles, Agamemnon and the rest. In fact, it swings altogether on the opposite apex of the given equilateral triangle."

"What the ding-ding difference does it make what group it belongs to?" said Simeon impatiently. "An asteroid is an asteroid."

"In one sense, yes; in another, no. The regular asteroids make up an independent system. The Trojans depend wholly on Jupiter. The Trojans, Jupiter and the sun all together give one of the known special solutions of the three-body problem. The Trojans, in effect, are satellites of Jupiter. Their orbits would go haywire if Jupiter's influence were ever removed. And that means, my dear sir, that the regional office having jurisdiction over Asteroid X is *not* Planets, on Ceres, as all of you thought—including Foote and his pirates—but Ganymede City, which assumes charge of the Jovian System."

They all spoke at once. Sally cried: "I see it all now." Horn puffed like an ancient engine. Ball said "*Damn!*" with concentrated intensity. And Simeon roared: "*That's* why you dragged

my ship all the way to Ganymede, you young snapperwhipper! So you could file that claim you swornhoggled me out of."

"I offered to split with you at bargain rates," Kerry said calmly. "You refused the offer."

"He's right," exclaimed Sally. "You did yourself out of a good thing by being too suspicious."

Simeon glared at her; glared at Kerry. Then he threw back his head and laughed until the tears trickled down his wispy beard.

"What's so funny, sir?" snapped Ball.

"That Dale beat me again. But I don't mind it so much thinking of Jericho Foote's face when he hears this. Even in bed he's been gloating. He spent a hundred thousand on his blessed pirates; and all he got in exchange is a good caning."

The door slid open and Foote hobbled in. One arm was in a sling; his face was puffed and swollen; and he required a cane for support.

"Evidently Mr. Foote has already heard the good news," Kerry announced calmly. "I sent him a note as soon as I landed."

"You—you tricksters!" screamed Foote. "I'll have the law on all of you. My hundred thousand! My asteroid! My arm! You can't get away with this—"

Kerry stepped up to him. His voice was dangerous. "Careful what you say, you old billy goat. You forget I *landed* on the asteroid. Your hirelings were so anxious to get back to you with their plunder that they left a bit of evidence behind. Something that belongs to *you*."

Foote shrank back in alarm. "It . . . it ain't so. They didn't dare . . . I mean, I don't know what you're talking about. Lemme see it!"

"You'll see it fast enough in court," Kerry assured him ominously. "On the very day, in fact, that your case against Mr. Kenton for assault and battery comes to trial."

Foote's face tried to wreathe itself into a smile and failed ignominiously. "Heh . . . heh! Maybe I was a bit hasty. After all, I'm willing to let bygones be bygones."

"You mean—you'll drop the action?"

"Well . . . that is . . . if—"

"If I don't produce my evidence. O. K. You sign a discontinuance and release, and I'll promise to keep what I've got out of public hands. But if at any time you—"

"I'll sign!" Foote croaked eagerly.

"I think," said Kerry, "Mr. Horn, as Mr. Kenton's attorney, is capable of drawing such a simple little document."

Horn said pompously: "Young man, I—"

"Sit down and do it without palaver," rasped Simeon.

The lawyer sat down without another word. His pen made slow, dignified movements on a sheet of paper.

Foote snatched it tremblingly from him, and signed it without even reading the contents. "There!" he quavered. "Now how about that—"

"You have my word." Kerry's voice was awe-inspiring.

"Yes, of course; of course! Well, good day; good day to you all." And Foote hobbled out faster than he had come in.

Simeon cleared his throat. "Har-rumph, young man. I didn't want to interfere, but I think Foote belongs in jail. If your evidence—"

Kerry grinned. "Evidence? Do you think I'd have bargained to withhold evidence of a felony if I had any? I'm a lawyer, sir. I don't compound felonies."

"Then . . . then . . ."

"Not a scrap did I find. Sheer bluff, sir. And a guilty conscience on the part of the estimable Foote."

"Well, I'll be didgosted!"

Kerry bowed. "There's a bit on my conscience, too. After all, I *did* do you out of a valuable asteroid."

"Don't mention it, son. I'll do the same for you some day. No man ever got the final best of Simeon Kenton yet."

"Here's hoping. But in the meantime I still have my conscience." His glance rested on Sally. "If Miss Kenton could be induced to help me spend some of my ill-gotten gains in town this evening, I'd feel I'd made some reparation."

"Being my father's daughter," murmured Sally, "I accept."

CHAPTER 8

KERRY DALE was a most unhappy young man. Sally Kenton had just turned him down. Well, if not exactly refused his proposal of marriage, she had hedged her response about with such provisos and conditions that he was certain could never be surmounted.

He had chosen the time and place of his offer with the greatest care. No more romantic spot could be found in the entire System than the Pleasure Dome in which they were presently ensconced. Three hundred miles above the surface of the Earth, the great translucite hemisphere swung in a counter-clockwise orbit around the parent globe at a speed that matched exactly the opposite rotation of the Earth. As a result, the artificial satellite sped forever within the shadow of the planet at the exact moment of midnight.

Above, through the lofty lucent dome, space was a gigantic black backdrop in which stars and constellations burned like festive torches. Beneath, through the equally transparent floor, the vast orb of Earth glimmered in pale moonshine, the dark blues of ocean alternating slowly with the lighter green of cul-

tivated fields, the ochres of deserts and the sudden glow of night-time cities.

The Interplanetary Commission had not intended to emulate the legendary Kubla Khan in decreeing a stately Pleasure Dome of space. Its purposes had been far more prosaic. The artificial satellite had been originally constructed as an astronomical outpost, free of the distortions of blanketing atmosphere, and capable of twenty-four hours an Earth-day observation of practically every sector of space.

But the Commission had reckoned without the imaginative genius of the mighty Simeon Kenton. Or perhaps it was his daughter, the decorative Sally Kenton, now sitting at a table opposite the unhappy Kerry Dale, who first suggested the idea.

In any event, old Simeon had broached his plan to the five-man Commission whose jurisdiction extended over the entire Solar System.

"Give me the concession of that doodad satellite you've got," he said, "and I'll pay you a million a year in rental."

"But our idea was to make it a space observatory, Mr. Kenton," protested Charles Melville, chairman of the Commission; "not an . . . er . . . commercial venture."

"Pure rot and didgosted fuddlement, Charlie," yelled old Simeon, his deceptive halo of wispy hair and wispier chin whiskers bristling with electricity. "Who said you can't have your telescopes and spectroscopes and radioscopes and all your blessed thingumbobs? They're already installed, aint they? An' look't all the floor space going to waste!" He shook his finger at the startled chairman. "You could have housed your instruments and quarters in an observatory five hundred yards in diameter at a cost of five to eight million. Instead you built a mile-wide affair, and it stood the people fifty million. Harrrumph! I'm doing you a favor getting you out from under."

The five men looked hastily at one another. There had already been veiled hints and grumblings on some of the more popular telecasts. How were they to know that Simeon Kenton

had skilfully planted the scripts before he came to them with his proposition?

Melville cleared his throat. "And suppose we don't accede to your idea, Kenton?"

The finger moved closer to his nose. "Then I'll blast this thing wide open," shouted old Simeon. "I'll take it to the courts; I'll drag it up and down the whole ringtoaded System. Ha! Har-rumph! Think o' the headlines! *Kellogg's Folly! Interplanetary Commission Prefers Taxing Plain Folk to Making Money on Mistake!*"

The Commission thought of the headlines. They thought of their previous encounters with this angelic old man. Five heads converged with a mutter of whispers. Five heads separated; one of them, slightly redfaced, said somewhat sheepishly: "All right, Simeon. We'll draw the necessary contracts." Then Melville remembered the dignity of his office. "But remember, Mr. Kenton," he said sternly, "we want no vulgarization of what is essentially a scientific satellite. We expect your concession to be . . . ah . . . in good taste, conservative—"

"Fiddle and faddle!" Simeon interrupted rudely. "Of course it won't be conservative! We both want to make money at it, don't we?" Then he chuckled. "Don't you worry, Charlie. This 'll be the talk o' the universe!"

It was. Nothing like the Pleasure Dome had ever been seen on any planet or in the space between. Even old Kubla Khan, through his laudanum-inspired ghost writer, a fellow named Samuel Taylor Coleridge, hadn't been able to dream up a layout like this.

The level translucite floor accommodated ten thousand pleasure-seekers in spacious comfort. There were sleep rooms for those who wished to stay indefinitely; there were swimming pools and flowering arbors; there were game rooms and gymnasia, beauty parlors, theaters with live shows and canned; libraries for the studious, restorative spas for the convalescent or the jaded; and a great central restaurant for the epicures, to

whose cuisine all the planets contributed their most exotic delicacies. Dispersed orchestras played toe-tickling music; and everyone agreed that dancing literally under the stars and a blazing moon, with nothing seemingly under foot except a turning Earth three hundred miles beneath, was a new thrill sensation.

The Pleasure Dome became almost immediately the Number One resort of the gay young people of Earth, and of those who, no longer young, sought vainly to recapture the romance and splendor of their youth. Swift little rocket craft mounted in steady streams to the moon-drenched hemisphere, discharged their parties into the reception-ports, and either returned to Earth or clung like innumerable leeches to the magnetic plates awaiting their owners' will. All of which brought *beaucoup* Earth dollars into the already swollen coffers of that tycoon of the spaceways, old Simeon Kenton.

But though the music played its catchiest, and the full moon and the stars above glowed their romantic darndest, young Kerry Dale merely glowered. His blue eyes snapped and his square jaw became even more angular.

He leaned across the table and scowled at his companion. "I know he's your father and all that, Sally," he snapped. "But if Old Fireball . . . er . . . Simeon Kenton expects me to knuckle under to him just because I love his daughter, he's got another think coming."

Sally Kenton twinkled demurely at her angry escort; and when she twinkled, the average young male became like putty in her shapely hands.

"But Old Fireball—as you so delicately call him—" she began.

Kerry reddened. "I'm sorry, Sally. It slipped out."

"Don't be sorry, Kerry. I know everyone calls him that; though you were the only one who ever dared say it to his face." The twinkle widened. "And he *does* explode like a fireball at

the slightest provocation. However, you misunderstood. He doesn't expect you to knuckle under—that is, voluntarily. May I quote him?"

"Go ahead," said Kerry gloomily.

" 'That impudent young scalawag'—remember, I'm quoting—'has hornswoggled me on two deals; and that's just two more than any other man alive has done to Simeon Kenton. Sally, my girl, his dadfoozled head's getting too big for his breeches' —remember again, I'm merely quoting my lovable old parent—'and until he's taken down a peg or two or three, there'll be no living with him.' "

"Bah!" said Kerry succinctly.

"And triple bah!" agreed Sally, while a curious smile sported among her dimples. "But he made me promise I'd . . . ah . . . not marry you until he'd taken you down that one or two or three pegs—"

"Of all the consummate gall," exploded Kerry. "And you, like an obedient daughter, agreed!" he added bitterly.

"Of course!" She shot him a glance from under long, curving eyelashes calculated to melt the heart of a Venusian swamp snake. "Perhaps," she hinted, "it might be worth while to let my revered progenitor get the better of you in some . . . er . . . deal. It would make him happy; and we could then—"

Kerry's heart was not at all like that of a Venusian swamp snake; yet on this occasion it failed to melt. "Never!" he said violently. "If he beats me, it 'll have to be—in a manner of speaking—fair and square, with no holds barred. And that," he added with a sudden grin, "will be—never."

"You *are* pretty confident of yourself, aren't you?" murmured Sally. "Or should I add, in the immortal words of my delightful but somewhat tongue-twisted ancestor: 'If I've told you a dozen times, I've told you once, Sally; that young man's liable to be like the beard of a comet's tail; he'll make his biggest splash just before he fades out completely.' "

Kerry rose from the table with a suddenness that almost

broke the magnetized dishes loose from their moorings. Sally looked startled. Had she perhaps overdone it? She loved this young man with the square jaw and the determined blue eyes; and it had cost her a mighty effort to hold him off when he proposed marriage. But an alarm bell had sounded inside her at the too-easy way in which he had forged ahead since the bare few months ago when he had been in her father's legal department and laid irreverent hands on old Simeon when he had been denied a raise. "It's for the good of his own soul and of mine," she said to herself somewhat shakily. Then panic invaded her. "Suppose—suppose I lose him?" she thought.

But the young man's gaze was not fixed on her; nor on the moving belt alongside with its endless array of tempting dishes. Instead, his head tilted and he stared intently through the upward sweep of the translucent dome.

Sally followed his stare. A myriad stars spangled the velvet backdrop of space. Mighty Jupiter hung suspended like a red-tinged eardrop. But some ten degrees of arc away, seemingly emerging from the constellation Sagittarius, lay the new celestial phenomenon which had been agitating the scientific circles of the System for the preceding month. A comet flamed like a gigantic tadpole, its head pure white and showing a perceptible disk, its tail curving away with a golden hue over two degrees of arc.

"What's the matter?" demanded Sally somewhat resentfully. "One would think you hadn't seen that blessed comet before?"

Kerry brought his gaze back to the beautiful young heiress to the Kenton millions. He looked at her, but his eyes were abstracted, contemplative.

"You're quite right, Sally," he said softly. "I hadn't. So your father thinks I'll fade out like a comet's tail, eh?"

The girl was troubled. "I'm sorry, Kerry," she apologized. "I didn't mean to insult you; but—"

The abstracted look gave way to a wide grin. "On the con-

trary," he said heartily, "you've given me an idea; for which many thanks. Wait here for me, will you, Sally? I'll be back in a few minutes."

He had already jumped on the transverse moving platform when Sally cried: "Where are you going?"

The young man pivoted, a grave smile on his square-jawed face. "There are certain things," he said, "I could discuss only with—my wife." He waved, turned and glided rapidly toward the outer rim.

Sally stamped her shapely foot. "Ohhh!" she stormed. "He's really impossible! Dad was right!" Then a little quirking smile played about the corners of her mouth. "It's tit for tat, I suppose. But you just wait and see, Mr. Kerry Dale!"

Blissfully ignorant of the implied threat, Kerry took an elevator to the apex of the Dome where the main observatory made a smaller nodule on the outer curve.

He went swiftly through the maze of instruments, the great electronic telescopes that thrust like probing fingers toward the distant stars.

The working scientists looked curiously at the intruder in their midst; but Kerry walked directly toward the office of the astronomer-in-chief—the famous Peter Wilson himself. As he approached, the slide mechanism whirred noiselessly open and a man came out.

Kerry stopped short in surprise. "Jericho Foote!" he exclaimed. "What the devil are you doing on the Pleasure Dome? I didn't think you'd go in for this sort of thing."

Foote scowled with his peculiar sidelong blink at the young man, while the long scar that ran raggedly from ear to chin turned a dull red against the unhealthy pallor of his face.

"You just keep out of my way, Dale," he snarled. "I've had enough of you and your tricks." His hand went involuntarily to his face; then, with a sidelong motion, he hurried away.

Kerry grinned as he stared after the president of Mammoth Exploitations. The last time they had met had been on the

asteroid Ceres, when Foote was just recovering from a caning old Simeon Kenton had administered to him, of which that scar was the visible evidence. But he had never recovered from the loss of the thermatite planet which Kerry had deftly snatched from both Foote and Kenton.

Then the grin faded to a thoughtful look. Foote never did anything without a purpose. Why was he on the Pleasure Dome? And why, especially, had he been to see Wilson?

The famous astronomer greeted Kerry warmly. The young man had been his star pupil in astrophysics back in Megalon University; and he had always bemoaned the fact that Kerry had gone into law instead of scientific research.

They shook hands. Wilson was thin and lanky, stooped over with thought and much peering into instruments.

"It's good to see you again," he said. "I've been hearing strange tales about you, Kerry."

The young man smiled. "Which no doubt have lost nothing in the telling," he retorted.

"Hmm! Perhaps not. But is it true that you . . . er . . . made monkeys out of Mr. Kenton's scientific experts, so that they actually helped you cause his asteroid to fall on yours?"

"That wasn't their fault, Professor Wilson. They didn't happen to have a certain chart before them."

"Hmm, yes. And I suppose Mr. Foote didn't happen to have another chart before him when you filed that chunk of thermatite as a Trojan asteroid while *he* was filing it as a member of the Belt?"

Kerry laughed. "You see, I didn't forget what you taught me back at college."

The astronomer shook his head. "I suppose you've been doing better financially this way than if you had joined my staff; but—"

"Not too bad," Kerry broke in hurriedly. He knew the other's rigorous standards and saw a lecture coming. "But

speaking of Foote, I saw him leave your office just now. I didn't know he was a friend of yours."

Wilson grimaced. "Friend? Oh no! It's really the first time we've met. He merely expressed an interest in what we've been doing on Comet X."

Kerry held his breath a moment; then exhaled slowly. "Aha!" he thought. "So Foote's got ideas too. That complicates matters."

Aloud he said: "Old Foote's been asking you questions about the new comet, eh?"

"Yes; quite a lot of them, too. I really hadn't expected to find a . . . hum . . . business man so interested in pure scientific speculation. After all, you can't make money out of a comet, ha, ha!"

"Ha! ha!" echoed Kerry. "No indeed! There's nothing emptier than a comet. A mere dust storm in space, so to speak. A head composed of tiny meteors; and a tail whose density is not much greater than that of our best vacuum."

But his laughter sounded hollow in his own ears. Foote had beaten him to it; and with the resources of Mammoth Exploitations at his command—

Wilson's face had lit up with intellectual excitement. "What you say is true enough, Kerry, of all the comets we have previously known. But Comet X seems different."

Kerry stiffened. He held his face impassive, and kept his voice to a flat calm.

"In what way, Professor Wilson?"

"In the first place, it's moving in an orbit so close to a parabola that it's difficult for even our most sensitive measuring instruments to determine from the elements so far taken whether it's an extremely long ellipse or actually a hyperbola. You know, of course, that a true parabolic orbit is an almost impossible affair. The slightest gravitational pull either way shifts it to an enclosed ellipse or an open hyperbola."

"Of course," Kerry agreed. "But your published calculations show it to be an ellipse, don't they?"

"An *apparent* one, my boy. It's too soon to be certain. The comet is still considerably beyond Saturn. We'll have to wait until it swings around the sun and returns on its other branch before we'll know definitely."

"Then all this talk about Comet X being the Star of Bethlehem is untrue?"

"It's still speculation." Wilson shook his head. "You know how the telecasters blow up everything. When we made our first calculations, we figured a tentative orbit of about 2430 years. Some keen reporter noted that if this were so, the comet must have made a previous appearance at the very beginning of the Christian Era. He came to me quite breathless. Then the comet was really the Star of Bethlehem? It *might* have been, I agreed; but pointed out how wholly tentative our results were as yet." The astronomer grinned ruefully. "But I was talking to empty air. That fellow was out of here, and rocketing to Earth so fast I understand he made a crash landing and almost lost his life."

"You said this comet was different—" hinted Kerry.

"Oh, yes. It's not, so to speak, a dust storm. The head is actually solid; a planetoid approximately one hundred and fifty miles in diameter."

Kerry perked up his ears. "Then it's really not a comet at all. It's an asteroid with an immensely eccentric orbit."

"No-o! The other indicia are wholly cometary. It shines by its own light, and gives off the emanations which constitute its tail. Yet it isn't hot. There's a huge envelope of atmosphere that seemingly defies the laws of gravity; and the spectroscopic observations we've just taken show lines we've never observed anywhere in the universe before. Comet X," said Wilson impressively, "is something new. I can't wait until it gets close enough for an expedition to take off."

"You haven't published your findings yet?" Kerry asked carefully.

"I'm working on my report now. I expect to get it to the Interplanetary Commission in a few days."

"It might be wise not to mention these . . . uh . . . facts to the newscasters," said Kerry with an easy laugh. "You remember what they did on that Star of Bethlehem business."

"You're quite right, my boy," agreed the astronomer. "I haven't told a soul so far, except you—"

"And Mr. Foote."

Wilson dismissed the president of Mammoth Exploitations with a wave of his hand. "Oh, he's a business man; not a telecaster chap. Come to think of it, Kerry, he said exactly what you did—to keep the whole thing secret until all the findings were in."

"He would," said Kerry grimly.

"Eh, what's that?"

"I said, Professor, you could rely on Foote not to tell another living soul."

"Dear me, I'm glad to hear it. For the moment I thought he might talk to the gentlemen of the press. I must learn to keep my mouth shut. I also talk too much. You understand, Kerry, what I've just told you is . . . er . . . confidential?"

"I won't breathe a word of it even in my sleep."

"Good! And—" the astronomer looked at the young man wistfully, "I couldn't induce you to join my staff?"

"Thank you, sir. Some day, perhaps—"

They shook hands warmly and Kerry departed, trying hard not to break into a run.

Wilson stared after him; then turned to an associate. "There goes a young man who has the makings of a top scientist in him. But he prefers to make money. What a pity!"

Shaking his head sadly, he returned to the laborious drafting of his report.

Kerry Dale found a most impatient young lady seated at the table where he had abruptly left her half an hour ago.

"Well!" she exclaimed, "I have never been so cavalierly treated in my life. If this is your idea of taking revenge—"

"Perish the thought!" he said almost gaily. "I had to—ah—meet an old friend. Look, Sally, I have to return to Megalon at once. You don't mind, do you?"

"Oh no, not at all! We might as well make a clean break of it now as later."

He was hustling the angry girl into her wraps and they were half way on the moving platform toward the exit port before he was able to reply. "This is no break, Sally, clean or otherwise. You're still going to marry me, in spite of your father, in spite of yourself."

"Oh, I am, am I? I'm beginning to think father was right, after all. What are these mysterious goings-on?"

By this time Kerry had almost pushed her into a space-taxi, snapped at the pilot: "A hundred extra if you make Megalon in fifteen minutes flat."

It was only after he had slid the curved door hermetically into position, and sank back into the seat that he said with considerable earnestness, "Sorry, my dear. This is something that I wouldn't even discuss with my *wife*."

Sally did not deign to answer, and the rest of the trip down to Earth was completed in silence. Fortunately, Megalon was almost directly underneath at the time, and the pilot cradled his craft at the space port in fourteen minutes, twenty seconds. He was grinning widely as he opened the door. "Made it, Mr. Dale." Then with a meaning look at the girl, he added with a wink: "Though what your hurry was—"

Kerry cut him short; thrust the fare and an extra hundred in his hand. "Thanks!" he said, and jumped out.

He turned to the girl: "I'm sorry, Sally, but this is an emergency. I'll put you on an aerocab to your home."

She stared at him incredulously. "You mean you're dump-

ing me. *That*, I must say, is an unprecedented experience for yours truly, Sally Kenton."

"No! No!" he protested unhappily. "It's just that it's an . . . er . . . unprecedented situation. Some day I'll explain to you."

"You needn't," she retorted frigidly. "And I am well able to find a cab myself. Good bye, Mr. Kerry Dale."

Her gloved finger had scarcely lifted when a cab rolled up. The driver stared eagerly. "Ah yes, Miss Kenton." Everyone knew her.

"My home, please," she said. She got in with a twinkle of shapely ankles. "Close the door, please, and get started."

The driver stared at Kerry; then at her. "Alone?" he asked.

"Alone."

As the cab rose into the air and darted off, a most unhappy young man flung toward the nearest ground cab. "Quick!" he ordered, "to the field office."

It was only a mile and thirty seconds away; but he had time for a sinking sensation. Was he making a fool of himself? Had he lost Sally in order to try for another coup? Then he gritted his teeth. She was her father's daughter, all right. And Old Fireball thought his head was getting too big for his breeches, did he? Just like the irascible old man to make an Irish bull like that! And he was going to take him down a peg, was he? Won't he be surprised! Kerry began to chuckle. Then he stopped short; frowned. But there was Foote, that Venusian swamp snake, as Old Fireball contemptuously called him. He had a head start, and his ships were faster.

The cab braked to a stop. Kerry got out, paid his bill, dashed into the great field office and to the nearest view-phone. The first call he put through was to Jem, his second in command and loyal assistant. Jem was the chap who had originally shanghaied him on board a Kenton freighter; and then switched bosses to follow the man he had kidnapped.

Jem's face looked startled and sleepy on the viewscreen. "What the hell," he grunted, with eyes still stuck together. "Waking a guy at one ack-emma." Then his eyes unstuck. "Hey, it's Kerry! What's wrong?"

Kerry spoke rapidly. "Listen to me carefully, Jem, and don't ask questions. The *Flash* is taking off tomorrow noon on a long trip, destination unknown. Round up Sparks and the crew at once. They *must* be at the space port with full kits at seven this morning, ready to blast off. Understand?"

Jem used his fingers to probe his sleep-filled eyes still further up. "But—Kerry!" he yelled wildly; "you just can't—"

He was staring at a blank screen. Kerry had switched off. Jem groaned; doused his head in cold water, sprayed untoweled drops all over the screen as he began his own calls.

"The son-of-a-space-cook's gone ray-crazy!" he moaned to himself. Then, as Sparks's equally sleepy visage appeared, Jem roared at him: "Orders from Mr. Dale. The *Flash* takes off tomorrow at noon. Report by seven A. M. on board with kit."

Sparks looked flabbergasted. "But I can't—" he commenced.

"The hell you can't," yelled Jem. "Them's orders!"

Meanwhile, Kerry was putting in a busy night. Supplies; equipment; food; full fuel tanks; charts; rayguns; then, as an afterthought, a special order of half a dozen space-suits, guaranteed impervious to radiations of every kind and to temperatures up to 500° Centigrade. "Wilson may be wrong about the temperature of the comet's core," he reasoned. "He said it was self-luminescent, didn't he?"

By seven in the morning, Kerry was tired but content. He hadn't slept a wink all night, but everything was rolling. Supply purveyors, at first furious at being awakened at dead of night, had been soothed by the offer of double payment, and had promised to make deliveries no later than ten. At seven, a disgruntled and bewildered crew rolled on board the *Flash*. But in the few short months they had learned to follow orders unquestioningly. No matter how many times their boss had

sounded screwy, in the end he had proved brilliantly right. And he paid wages triple the regular scale!

Jem stared hard at Kerry. "Where 're we going?" he growled.

"To Ganymede."

"Ganymede! That's a long run, an' we got back from there only a month ago." He stared still harder. "Where else 're we going, Kerry?"

"Oh," the young man said vaguely, "planes alpha, beta, gamma." Then he grinned, slapped his mate on the back. "Sealed orders, Jem. Just you get the *Flash* shipshape for every possible contingency—and I mean *every* contingency—while I get my port clearance papers."

Jem gazed puzzled after his young owner, as Kerry hurried over to the field office. "There's trouble ahead, me lad," he communed with himself. "Every time Kerry talks like that, we land in a whole durned pot of it."

When the equipment began to flow on board, he was more than ever convinced that his hunch was right. His eyes widened at the rayguns, the hand weapons that hurled space torpedoes nosed with atomic warheads, and the recently invented impervious space suits. "Oh! Oh!" he exclaimed, "now I *know* we're in for it. But what the hell," he added philosophically, "that lad always manages to land on his feet." He swung on his crew. "All right, you space-drifters, get going," he roared. "We aint got all year ta powder our noses."

Sally Kenton was an intelligent young lady as well as a sight for admiring eyes. She could put two and two together and make a full-length volume out of it as well as the next one. As she sat in the aerocab, her thoughts clicked like well-oiled counters. The frown vanished; and she smiled. It was a pity to waste that smile on the darkness of the cab. "All right, Mr. Kerry Dale," she said softly. "As you yourself so nicely put it, *no holds barred.*"

Simeon Kenton looked like a Della Robbia cherub in his sleep suit; but his temper was definitely not on the cherubic side at being awakened from his beauty rest.

"It's bad enough," he yelled at his lovely daughter, "that you go gallivanting with that snipperwhacker of a Dale who's bent on driving me to my grave, but you've got to get me outa sleep to tell me about it."

"What a way," said Sally reproachfully, "to talk of your future son-in-law!"

Old Simeon stopped in midstream, looked keenly at his daughter.

"Eh, what's that?"

She looked demurely down. "Kerry Dale asked me to marry him."

"And you—"

"Told him I couldn't marry him until you approved."

Old Simeon's face was a moving panorama in which bewilderment chased astonishment and suspicion chased bewilderment.

"You told him *that*?" he gasped.

"Of course!" Her demureness was a sight to behold. "What else could I have said?"

The old man gulped, looked apoplectic, then suddenly calmed down. "All right, Sally," he purred. "What blamefoozled devilment are you up to now? Don't keep your poor old father standing here in his bare feet on tenterhooks."

She smiled fondly at him. "I really think you were right. Things have been too easy for him. He has to be taken down a bit . . . but he mustn't get hurt in the process," she added hastily.

Kenton exhaled gratification. "Ha! I always said you had a level head on your shoulders, Sally. You're a blick of the old chop; I mean—a chick of the old blop—oh, drat it, you know what I mean."

"I think I do, dad," she murmured.

He was wide awake now, eager. "But how 're we gonna take him down, Sally? He's a smart young man, ding drat him! Twice he's done me in already."

"I don't know the full answer; but let me tell you what happened."

She narrated the events of the evening rapidly and succinctly. When she had ended, Simeon merely stared. "Blame it all, I don't see a thing."

"Oh, dad," she said reproachfully, "you didn't make your way in the world by not seeing things. Let me try and put the pieces together for you. It was obvious an idea struck Kerry when I quoted that rather ridiculous phrase of yours about the beard of the comet's tail."

"It *wasn't* ridiculous," her father started indignantly; then subsided. "Go on, Sally."

She ticked off her points. "He stared at that new comet a while; then left me abruptly. I watched where he went. He went, dad, up to the observatory. Twenty minutes later he was back, excited. He hustled me down to Earth, dumped me at the space-port, and rushed off for the field office."

Simeon digested the sequence of events. Then: "I still don't see anything except that he's a strange young man."

"I'm surprised at you, father," she cried impatiently. "Kerry does nothing on impulse; meaning he has a motive for everything. Just now his motive is to make a lot of money and prove to you that he can outsmart you any day."

"Why, the young blitherskite!" commenced Simeon in a rage; then grinned cherubically at his daughter. "Let him just try it again."

"He *is*, dad. There's something about that comet which smells like money; a *lot* of it. And they must have told him something in the observatory that made the smell so overpowering it caused him to ditch me at the space-port like a sack of meal."

Now if there was anything in the System further removed

from a sack of meal than Sally, it had not been discovered yet. Awe and admiration struggled in old Simeon's face. "Sally," he said impressively, "you *are* a chip of the old block. There," he crowed delightedly, "I got it right that time! Ha-har-rumph! We'll see fast enough."

His bare feet padded on the thick carpet toward the visi-screen. He flicked a switch. "Gi' me Professor Wilson at the Pleasure Dome Observatory," he snapped at the operator. "Simeon Kenton calling him."

The ascetic features and stooped shoulders of the astronomer swam on the screen, looked startled at the sleep-suited old man with his bare skinny shanks, and the lovely image of Sally in the background.

"Mr. Kenton," he exclaimed. "This is . . . uh . . . an unexpected pleasure . . . at this hour—"

"*What* hour?" demanded Simeon. "Aint all hours midnight on the Pleasure Dome?"

Wilson permitted himself a faint smile. "Well, in a manner of speaking, it is. But—"

"You're right, Wilson. It's late here on Megalon, and getting later every minute. So let's get down to cases. That Comet X you've been keeping an eye on—what 've you found out about it you aint been telling the public or the Commission?"

The astronomer blinked. "What a remarkable coincidence!" he gasped. "You're the third man in the last two hours to ask—"

Old Simeon's ears pricked up like a hunting dog's. "Eh? Who else has been asking besides Kerry Dale?"

Wilson's face fell. "So Kerry told you," he said sadly. "After I pledged him to secrecy."

"No, he didn't," snapped Simeon. "I have . . . ha . . . my own way of finding out. But who was the other fellow?"

"It doesn't matter much now," replied Wilson resignedly. "It seems everyone's due to know before the Commission itself. He was Jericho Foote."

"Aha!" snorted Kenton. "And double ha! That son of a Venusian swamp snake! And what did you tell these two special favorites, hey?"

Wilson explained his findings, much as he had given them to Kerry.

"Hmm, so that's it." Kenton's mind was working so hard you could hear the wheels whir. "Do you think, Wilson," he asked finally, "that there comet's head has precious metals in it?"

"I don't know. The spectroscopic examination discloses elements either wholly unknown so far or existing under such unusual conditions as to distort their spectrum completely from the usual lines."

"Ha! Well, thank you, Wilson. Thank you a lot!"

"I suppose," said the astronomer with a mild sort of bitterness, "that I don't have to tell you to keep this . . . er . . . well guarded secret from the newscasters."

"You certainly don't," chuckled Kenton.

"There, you see!" cried Sally as the astronomer's resigned visage faded from view.

"I certainly do," retorted her revered parent grimly. "Now lemme get the space port."

The night official was eager to tell the mighty Simeon Kenton everything—but *everything*.

"Yes, Mr. Kenton, Mr. Dale is here now. He's been using a private booth steadily for the last hour. Shall I ask the operator to find out whom he's been calling?"

"Certainly not," snapped Kenton at the too-eager official. His was a hard code, but it was a fair one. No unethical tricks; no illegal methods. "But you *can* tell me if the young . . . ah . . . man is intending to blast off from Earth shortly?"

The official brightened from his rebuff. "Yes, he asked me for clearance papers for his ship, the *Flash*. He's taking off at noon today."

"Noon!" exclaimed Simeon. "And where for?"

The official scratched his head. "Come to think of it, he was pretty vague about it. But when I said he *had* to clear for a specific destination, he said Ganymede."

"Ha!" Simeon's face glowed with excitement, and Sally started. Ganymede, Jupiter's largest satellite, was the last port of call in the System. And Comet X lay beyond, outside the orbit of Saturn. "Noon, did you say?"

"That's what his papers will call for."

"Good. Well, much obliged to you."

"Ask him about Foote, dad," said Sally quickly.

"By the ring-horned moon, Sally, you're a gem. I clean forgot!" He swung back to the screen. "Is that Venusian . . . uh . . . I mean Jericho Foote, also getting ready to blast off?"

The official looked astonished. "Mr. Foote?" he echoed. "Why, he left just an hour ago. In fact, he took off in his private ship about ten minutes before Mr. Dale came in."

"The devil he did!" exploded Simeon. "Destination Ganymede?"

"Why—why, yes, sir."

"And I suppose," purred Kenton, "he had his clearance papers prepared long in advance?"

The official hesitated; looked unhappy. "Why . . . hmm . . . no, sir. He came tearing in, explained it was an emergency. Some disaster on Ganymede to one of his ships. So I made out his papers immediately." He didn't think it proper to add that a thousand dollar bill had deftly changed hands in the process.

Kenton swelled like a bullfrog getting ready for its mating song. "Don't you know the regulations?" he yelled. "Eight Earth hours must elapse between application and clearance."

The official reddened, stammered. "Why, it—it was—er—an emergency."

"Emergency, my foot—and I mean, Foote! By God, don't you let that young—ha—Dale sneak off before noon, or you'll be out of a job so fast you'll wish you were on Pluto."

"I—I won't," said the official eagerly. But Kenton had already switched off, leaving the unhappy man wiping his brow and muttering: "Whew! No wonder they call him Old Fireball. Hmmm! Something's up that got the old man so mad." He felt in his pocket for the comforting feel of the thousand dollar bill and returned jittery to his duties.

Sally looked in dismay at her parent. "So Jericho Foote got the jump on Kerry. He'll get to Comet X long before him. Poor Kerry!"

Old Simeon stared at her with a half-indignant, half-commiserating glance. It was difficult to determine which had the upper hand. Then indignation triumphed. "Har-rumph, Sally," he snorted. "You seem to forget that *both* were trying to steal a march on Simeon Kenton. Sneaking off to grab what's on that comet and laughing up their dingbusted sleeves at getting the better of *me*."

"But how can you stop Foote?" she wanted to know. "His private cruiser is as fast as anything you've got, dad. And if there's *anything* out there, he'll file on it long before you can get under way."

Most illogically she said nothing about Kerry Dale. For she knew very well that his *Flash*—a remodeled old cargo ship—could be handily caught up with and left flatfooted in space by any one of a dozen ships at her father's disposal. Somehow or other, now that the showdown was on, she didn't feel happy about it.

Her esteemed parent grinned. It was an angelic grin; and when he made that saintly show on his features, it meant he had some particularly devilish idea in mind.

"Ha!" he chuckled. "I think yours truly can stop 'em both in their tracks."

"But how?"

He didn't answer. Instead, he flipped the visiscreen, barked into it: "Charles Melville; an' I want him dingbusted fast!"

The dignified chairman of the Interplanetary Commission was no more pleased than anyone else at being routed out of bed at the ungodly hour of three in the morning. "Well, what is it now, Simeon?" he demanded grumpily of his belated caller.

"Look, Charlie, your Commission's got jurisdiction over that new Comet X, aint it?"

"I—I suppose so. We've got jurisdiction over the entire System. But—"

"Then let me tell you something you don't know yet. Comet X 's got a solid core of brand-new elements. It's liable to be the biggest thing that's come in the System since—since—har'—rumph—Pharaoh fished Moses from the bulrushes—or maybe it was the other way round. I don't remember."

"What's that?" exclaimed Melville, his grumpiness and his sleep completely fled. "Where'd you get *that* information?"

"Oh, I've got sources, Charlie. But," added Kenton virtuously, "I don't take advantage of 'em as some other people I know. *I* obey the rules and regulations of the Commission."

Melville stared suspiciously. This was a new one on him. Oh, to be sure, old Simeon never exactly *broke* a regulation; but he certainly knew how to twist and distort one until it amounted to the same thing. "Come clean, Simeon," he snapped. "What do you want now?"

"Only to see that your jurisdiction isn't flouted, my friend," purred Kenton even more virtuously than before, if that were possible. "Now, if I wanted to be underhanded, I could of said nothing an' sent a fast ship out to the comet to file on anything I could find of value, afore your Commission had a chance to lay down rules. But I ain't built that way. I'm law-abiding and I believe in acting fair and square, giving everyone the same chance. That's why I'm calling you now."

"Hmmm!" grunted the chairman. "There's something behind this I don't understand. But again I ask, come clean."

The look of injured innocence on old Simeon's face was

something to behold. Even Sally, well accustomed to her parent's injured looks, had hastily to stuff a handkerchief in her mouth to choke off a giggle.

"This is clean, Charlie," yelled Kenton irascibly, forgetting his pose. "It's as clean as your dadfoodled face. Anyway, it's the Commission's duty by law and constitution to lay down the proper rules and regulations for claiming and filing on newly discovered territory, aint it?"

"Yes, it is."

"Well, then, all I ask of you is to follow your own precedents—when the Asteroid Belt was opened up; and the Jupiter satellites. Give everyone an equal chance. Proclaim a starting day. Let anyone that wants to prospect start at the same time from Megalon. Register all entrants to make sure there's no dirty water at the crossroads. No claims legal unless all conditions are complied with. No sneaking out afore the gun."

Melville contemplated him intently a moment. "Equal chance, my eye!" he snorted. "You've got the fastest ships in the System."

"No, I ain't. That planetoidal scoundrel, Foote, 's got just as fast. And how about the private racers? Besides, that's the way it's been done before."

The chairman hesitated, then said doubtfully: "I suppose it's the only possible way to avoid worse complications or inequities. But," he added meaningly, "we'll put off the starting date for two weeks from now, so that *everyone* has the same chance to get ready."

"That's all right with me, Charlie," agreed Simeon meekly. "What's fair is fair. But don't you forget to put in the proclamation that any damn fool who tries to beat the gun has to come back to Megalon and begin from scratch."

"I won't. There's a Commission meeting scheduled for nine o'clock. I'll have them draw the necessary documents immediately."

"Before noon?"

"Before noon."

"Good!" said Simeon genially. "Now get back to bed and catch up on that beauty sleep that ugly map of yours needs so badly, Charlie. Ha! Ha!"

"Ha! Ha!" grunted the chairman of the Interplanetary Commission somewhat sourly. Then, as the screen went blank, he grumbled thoughtfully to himself. "I wish I knew what old Simeon's up to. Oh, well, it's the law." He sighed, and went back to bed.

"That puts Kerry out of the running, doesn't it," said Sally remorsefully. "I—I'm sorry I told you."

Simeon softened. "Look Sally, he was out of the running anyway. Foote got the jump on him." He patted her shoulder. "This 'll give him a chance to show how really smart he is."

She was frankly sobbing now. "With all the cards stacked against him?"

"That's the real test, aint it? That's how I came up—the hard way; every blitherskite's hand against me. I'll say this, Sally," he added kindly. "If he beats me now, you can marry him."

An impish smile shone through her tears. "Dad," she said, "I'm marrying him in any event."

"Ha! Disobeying your own blood and flesh, are you?"

She kissed him. "In this case . . . yes! And remember, I gave you the first break. After this, I'm on Kerry's side."

"Okay, you viper in my bosom," he chuckled. "But mind you—you gotta play fair. No using what you wormed out o' me tonight."

"*I* wormed out of you!" she started indignantly. Then she twinkled. "All right, dad. But after this, business is business."

"And no holds barred."

"Right!" Father and daughter solemnly shook hands.

CHAPTER 9

AT TWENTY MINUTES before noon the *Flash* was battened down, its entry ports slid into hermetically sealed position. The members of the crew, their earlier grumpiness forgotten in the rush of events, the backbreaking toil of getting ready against time, stood at their respective positions, awaiting the final command to blast off.

Kerry Dale checked his clearance papers to make certain everything was in order. They were. A hundred dollar bill slipped to the port official had seen to that. Only one thing disturbed him. The strange insistence of the official that he must under no circumstances take off before the moment of noon. He had puzzled over that for the last hour. The man had looked a little embarrassed; scared even. And he had refused to elaborate when Kerry pressed him for the reason.

It was a little thing; but Kerry was accustomed to watching little things. As the minutes ticked slowly off, he became even more uneasy. Something was in the wind; of that he was sure. He spoke his fears to Jem.

The mate laughed it off. "What difference does it make?" he wanted to know. "We'll get to . . . uh . . . Ganymede

just as fast. In a two week trip we kin make up a few minutes easy enough. That is," he added with peculiar emphasis, "if we're headin' that way." He was a little hurt that Kerry hadn't seen fit to take him into his confidence.

Kerry grinned. "Of course we are, Jem." Then he frowned again. Foote knew what he did; and Foote was a pretty slick customer. Had he somehow gotten wind that Kerry knew too, and was even now taking measures to head him off? Kerry never thought of old Simeon Kenton in this connection. He certainly didn't know that Sally had put two and two together and made a million. He had thought of Sally plenty during the hectic night; and with remorse. He had treated her cavalierly. But then, she had done the same to him! His jaw set grimly. There was a lot of unfinished business to take care of when he returned. *When* he returned? Who knew what awaited him on Comet X—what perils, what unknown lethal gases, what destructive radiations. And there was Foote, who wouldn't hesitate to kill—if he could get away with it—in order to gain his ends.

Sparks was seated at his receptor; his lean, dry face that stemmed from an ancient Yankee ancestry working calmly on some Venusian pungent root. Jem was leaning idly against the observation port, staring disinterestedly at the field outside. Hardly anything was stirring there. They were the only ship ready for taking off. The administration building loomed foursquare about two hundred yards away; and even that seemed deserted.

The warning signal buzzed on the receptor. That was the official channel, always left open. Sparks shifted his plug root to the other cheek, flicked a switch. Charles Melville, chairman of the Interplanetary Commission, sharpened into focus on the screen. In his hand was a legal-looking document.

"Attention, all planets, satellites, asteroids and ships in space. I am about to read to you an important regulation, regularly promulgated and sealed by the Interplanetary Com-

mission this twenty-third day of the fifth month in the Earth year two thousand, four hundred and one. Subject, Comet X. It having been brought to the attention of the Commission that the said Comet X possesses a solid planetoidal core of hitherto unknown elements which may prove of definite monetary and other value, and the said Comet X coming under the jurisdiction of the Commission as by law hitherto provided, we do now declare to all and every inhabitant of the System that—"

At the first mention of Comet X, Kerry went rigid. The gears of his mind meshed smoothly and raced at breakneck speed. So Foote had found out he was taking off, and had pulled some fast work at the Commission to prevent him. He walked rapidly and noiselessly toward the screen. As he did, Jem, leaning against the observation port, uttered an exclamation. "Something's up!" he cried. "There's the field official —and—well, what do you know—Miss Kenton! They're runnin' toward us like all hell's afire. By Saturn's rings," he said admiringly, "that gal kin run! She's a—"

Kerry slipped, and fell heavily against the visiscreen. There was a jar, a crash, a little spurt of blue flame and some smoke. The screen went blank.

Sparks cried out in anguish: "You've went and busted the screen, Mr. Dale."

"Sorry!" said Kerry, righting himself. "I slipped."

Jem turned at the crash, swung back to the port. "By God, they're yelling at us. There must be some message—" He moved toward the mechanism that regulated the entry port.

Kerry whirled, physically and mentally. Sally! Had she come to tell him she had changed her mind—that she would marry him, father or no father? But why then was the official running with her? A blinding light burst on him. Now he knew why the man had been so insistent that the *Flash* stay in the blasting cradle until the stroke of noon. He had *known* this Commission directive was coming—to stop him. He

cursed under his breath. Taking his hundred dollar bribe and laughing inwardly at the gullible fool all the while. Sally—Jericho Foote—the Commission—everyone was against him!

His jaw set, his eyes grew hard.

"Orders, Jem," he rasped. "Blast off at once!"

Jem turned unbelievingly. "But the field instructions, Kerry," he protested. "It's still ten minutes o' noon. And Miss Sally—"

Sparks also protested. "I have to fix the screen first. A Commission regulation says—"

"This is *my* order," grated Kerry. "Blast off at once!"

Jem stared, shrugged and obeyed. The pop-eyed crew, bewildered at the tense little drama, sprang to the controls. There was a whoosh—a roar—and the *Flash* hurtled smoothly upward, leaving a blast of flame echoing in the rocket pit beneath.

Sally and the official were so close that the concussion almost knocked them to the ground. The official gasped: "They've taken off!" Then he wailed: "What will your father say, Miss Kenton!"

"Oh, drat my father!" she snapped most unfilially. She stared upward as the craft soared swiftly into the heavens, accelerating steadily. It grew smaller and smaller on the sight; became a tiny, elongated oval, and then vanished into the sunlit sky.

She had rushed to the field to be on the spot exactly at the moment that the Commission directive was being publicly promulgated. That way she would not be breaking her promise to old Simeon. Then she could warn Kerry not to take off. Within the two-week grace period he might be able to purchase or charter one of the special racing craft that competed in the great annual Planetary Derby around the triangular Earth—Mars—Venus course. Millions of Earth *dollars*, Martian *santus* and Venusian *merales* were always wagered on the result.

But now he was gone. And unless he was brought back—She turned, left the astonished official standing open-mouthed, rushed back to the administration building. She hastened to the board of the Intersystem Communications Service.

"Will you put through a call," she said breathlessly, "to the *Flash*, Mr. Kerry Dale, owner? It just took off."

The trim young operator glanced admiringly at the flushed girl; then took a double take. Wow! This was Sally Kenton! "Why, of course, Miss Kenton," he gulped. He plugged in on the local band, spoke into the communication. "Miss Kenton calling the *Flash*, Mr. Kerry Dale. Miss Kenton calling the *Flash*, Mr. Kerry Dale."

For twenty minutes the monotone droned on, while Sally said nervously, every time he showed signs of quitting: "Try them again, please. They *must* answer."

At length he gave it up. "I'm dreadfully sorry, Miss Kenton. They don't answer. Can't understand it; unless something's wrong with their set."

"No, there's nothing wrong," said Sally bitterly. "Thank you very much."

As the girl marched stormily out, the operator shook his head in disbelief. "Holy cats!" he breathed. "They must 've quarreled. Imagine a guy not answering a gal like that!"

Sally stood blinking a moment in the outer sun. It was to hold back the tears rather than because of the glare. Her first reaction was anger; her second, penitence. Kerry was furious at her; and with reason. He evidently knew of her complicity in the attempt to head him off. Then another thought struck her. Perhaps he had deliberately shut off communications in the belief that the Commission was recalling his clearance papers. She knew he could not have heard the whole pronouncement before he took off so hurriedly. Melville had barely begun when the *Flash* blasted.

She knew enough of Kerry's mind by this time to follow his reasoning with a fair degree of accuracy. Later on he would claim, with a great show of surprise, that his set was out of order, and he had never received the recall. Therefore his clearance would continue legal.

But what he did *not* know—since he evidently did not hear the whole of the directive—that it applied to everyone, not just to himself alone. If he kept his instrument shut until he reached Ganymede, it would then be too late. She knew the *Flash* had been thoroughly overhauled, with new rocket tubes to increase its speed; but it still would take two weeks to Ganymede. By that time it would be much too late to get back to Earth as the starting point.

She clenched her shapely hands, exclaimed: "What an insufferable little smart aleck you've turned out to be, Sally Kenton. He'll never forgive you for this—*never*!"

Then another thought struck her. She smiled, for the first time in hours. She looked around, saw the port official standing in agonized indecision some distance away. She beckoned somewhat imperiously.

He hastened over. "I'm truly sorry, Miss Kenton," he moaned, "for what happened. Please tell Mr. Kenton it wasn't my fault. You saw—"

"Never mind that," she cut in. "You know my little flier?"

"Of course."

"Will you be kind enough to have it taken out of the drome, fueled and adjusted just as fast as possible? How long will it take?"

"About an hour."

"Splendid!" She smiled sweetly on the official. "I'll be back before that."

She hastened home by aerocab; breathed a sigh of relief when she found that her father was gone to the office. She didn't want to meet him and answer embarrassing questions

just then. In the back of her mind she realized that what she intended to do was sheer insanity. But she thrust the realization violently into the back of her consciousness.

She packed a small overnight bag hastily, thrust some food and drink-pellets into a flapped pocket. She wrote a little note to Simeon, sealed it and placed it where he would be sure to find it that evening if she hadn't returned. Then she fled back to the space port.

"Is she ready yet?" she queried of the official. He shook his head. "Not yet. The mechanics found that your rocket tubes weren't firing synchronously. They're truing them up."

"Oh! How long will it take?"

"Perhaps two or three hours more."

Despair hammered at her. It was almost two now. Another two—say, three hours meant that Kerry had a five hour start. Her flier was a speedy little job, but with the *Flash's* souped-up rockets, it would take her maybe twenty-odd hours to catch up to it. And that meant—

Again she deliberately closed her eyes to the possible consequences. This whole terrible mess had been her doing, and she must undo it as far as she could.

"You must hurry the mechanics," she gasped. "Tell them there'll be a very special tip if they can shade that time."

"I'll tell them, Miss Kenton." He started away, stopped. "Of course, if you're in a real hurry, and you're not going far out, the tubes might work adequately enough as is, if you keep favoring the right-hand one. But for any long distance—Hmm! You'll pardon my asking—it's regulations, you know—but where *are* you going?"

"Oh! Er—just to the moon."

She had to think fast. Local traffic—which meant up to and including the orbit of the moon—required no special clearance.

"Well, then—"

She gestured him on. "No; I'd rather be sure everything's okay," she said hurriedly.

"As you wish." But as he went to the drome, he wondered. "There's something smelly about this whole blamed business," he muttered to himself. "First Mr. Foote. Then young Dale. Then Mr. Kenton. Then the Commission. And *now* Miss Kenton. Hmm! Perhaps I had better contact the Commission." Then he shook his head at himself in violent negative. "And get Miss Kenton on my neck—*and* Old Fireball?" He mopped his forehead. "Willie Briggs!" he berated himself. "You keep your nose out of this! You know of nothing; you acted in good faith; you've kept strictly within the rules—except, hmm, for old Foote—and they can't hang anything on you. She *said* she was going to the moon, didn't she?"

With which comforting thought he proceeded to the drome.

It was exactly five in the afternoon and the flier had still not appeared. Sally was in an agony of impatience; she pleaded, she stormed; she offered fabulous rewards for haste. But the sweaty mechanics, for all their herculean efforts, could proceed no faster. They had found a cracked firing pin. "It won't last fifty thousand miles," the foreman explained. "And then you'll be driftin' helpless in space, calling for a tow. We're doin' the best we can, ma'am."

At long last the sleek little one-seater was trundled out, swung into the firing cradle. She hopped on board, the ports slid shut; the men fell back.

She slammed into the seat, panting jitterishly to herself: "More time lost! I'm pointed toward the moon; but I didn't dare make them suspicious." She punched at the controls. The craft lifted in a long shining rush.

The foreman shaded his eyes. "A beauty, aint she?" he said admiringly.

"Yes," nodded the official absently. "One of the finest one-seaters ever made."

The foreman stared; then he chuckled. "I didn't mean the ship, sir. I meant the *girl*."

He looked up again; let out an alarmed cry. "Hey! She's shifting course away from the moon. Jumping Jupiter, did we foozle the job?"

The official looked up. He was haggard. "No, I don't think so," he said slowly.

"But she's heading way out inta space. I thought she could navigate."

"She can. Er . . . Joe . . ."

"Yes?"

"Keep your lip buttoned about this."

The foreman stared; but the official had already walked hurriedly away. He scratched his head. "Well, I'll be double-rocketed!" he said with considerable feeling. He evidently found comfort in the ejaculation; for he repeated it several times as he went back to the drome.

CHAPTER 10

SALLY settled down for a long, hard chase. She spread her charts, checked the direct course to Ganymede. It would take about twenty hours of pushing at top speed to catch up with the *Flash*. And she had some twenty-three hours fuel supply in her tanks. That would be enough. Because Kerry, of course, would turn back when he heard her news. He'd either give her some drums to replenish her supply, or she could latch on his magnetic plates. Everything would turn out all right.

With this comforting assurance, she tested her equipment, found everything in apple-pie working order. The rockets throbbed steadily and softly; the Earth swung in a wide arc underneath and turned into a huge ball that contracted slowly to the size of the moon; and then grew smaller and smaller until it was only the most brilliant star in the heavens.

The hours fled, and still the rockets kept up their full-throated song. She nibbled at some food, swallowed several drink-pellets, made certain that the re-oxygenation apparatus was functioning properly. It was.

She gave herself up to visions of their meeting, way out in space. Her dimples showed as she anticipated that. Wouldn't

Kerry be surprised? *And* thankful! She wouldn't tell him—at least not until they got back—that she had been responsible for what happened. "But after all," she defended herself in this imaginary conversation, "it was *your* fault, Kerry. Had you told me what you were planning, I would have taken your side. As you see, now that I know, I've come to warn you."

The smile deepened; she hummed softly to herself. When they got back, she thought, she'd help him get hold of one of those racing craft. Once started on even terms, she had sufficient confidence in Kerry to feel that he would beat out the others, *including* her father. "*Why*," she exclaimed suddenly, "I could hire Clem (that was last year's winner of the Planetary Derby) to pilot his own ship. Then *no* one will be able to get to Comet X ahead of him."

A ship came up fast on her visorscreen, dazzling in the reflected glow of the distant sun. Sally shrank instinctively in her seat, as if thus to avoid observation. It was the space-liner out of Mars on its regular run to Earth. The liner swerved toward her, and the buzzer sputtered, as the ship called for her to make radio contact. Sally gritted her teeth and kept her switch closed. The liner hesitated, then proceeded on its course; Sparks wondering audibly to himself at this tiny craft so far out in space that refused to talk. "Some damn fool," he muttered, "out on a joy ride. Ought to have his license revoked." Then he shrugged and forgot it.

Sally breathed easier as the big liner disappeared rapidly and she had space once again all to herself. She did not want to answer embarrassing questions, or have her escapade reported back on Earth.

The hours sped by. She was steadily accelerating for maximum speed—about three hundred miles a second. It usually took about eight hours to do this. Faster acceleration not only was enormously wasteful of fuel, but could cause the pilot to black out from the immense pressure. Once that speed was attained, she could then coast along, using her precious fuel

merely to overcome the contrary tug of the sun and to shift course. Even so, as she watched her instruments, Sally became a trifle anxious. Her tanks were already half empty, and the mark was falling with disconcerting speed. Yet she dared not stop accelerating. Kerry, she knew, would be pushing his ship to the limit; the capacious hold of a cargo ship could accommodate an immense amount of fuel.

More hours passed. One quarter full. One sixth full. The rocket tubes were laboring with the constant strain of acceleration. Sally herself became somewhat dizzy. There was a roaring in her ears. She blinked at the speed counter that converted the thrust of the reactors into miles per second. Ah! The pointer had finally crept to the required mark. With a sigh of relief she cut her power down to a whisper. She had reached the limit of endurance, both of her ship and of herself.

But her tanks were only a tenth full! Sally stared at the damning pointer in dismay. She had used up more fuel than she had expected; and she was only nine hours out. Certainly she could coast; but the steady counter-pull of the sun would gradually slow her down and eventually reverse her direction to a long, interminable, slanting fall toward its burning bosom.

She flung open her visorscreen, plugged in all radio channels. Not a thing showed on the screen but the vast immensity of space, spangled with a host of coldly frightening stars. Not even a whisper of sound broke the deathly silence. Only the tiniest thrumming from her own tubes.

For the first time in her life Sally felt panic. She was a trifle over ten million miles away from Earth, and horribly alone. The Mars-Earth run was fairly well trafficked; but she had cut across the lane immediately after sighting the liner. The direct Ganymede route was one of the least frequented in the System. Most ships going to that distant outpost preferred to head first for Ceres in the Asteroid Belt to break voyage and

refuel. A dreadful thought struck her. Suppose Kerry had done just that! What had made her take it for granted that he would head directly for Ganymede? Suppose even he had taken on enough fuel to swing straight for the comet? In that case she would never catch him! She couldn't even contact Earth at this distance. Her radio was powered only for a radius of about three million miles.

Sally shook her head sharply to clear her thoughts, tried to still the sudden hammering of her heart. She must make up her mind fast what to do. She made some rapid calculations. If she kept her rockets on to hold to a steady three-hundred-mile-a-second gait, she had, without allowing for unexpected contingencies, enough in her tanks to keep her going for another ten hours. *Or*, she could drop the chase and cut back to the intersection with the Mars-Earth run where there was a chance of contacting some ship. But that would mean failure, and a disastrous end to all Kerry's plans. He would never forgive her for that; and properly so.

With a steady hand she increased the power. Long streamers of flame shot backward into space, and the little flier throbbed with renewed power.

The die was cast! She would either catch up to Kerry or—But that way lay madness!

The hours continued to pass. Once she had to swerve wide of her course to avoid an oncoming stream of meteors. The fuel pointer sank alarmingly. Space was a total void. Not a ship cut across the screen. By the seventeenth hour the pointer hovered near zero. A half hour later the rockets gave a last futile sputter; died. Silence lay like a palpable thing within the little craft.

Sally sagged against her seat. Already she was losing speed; slowly, very slowly, as the sun's tug—and even that of distant Earth—began to make themselves felt. Slowly, but inexorably.

Frantically she studied the screen. Nothing but the cold mockery of the stars. She switched on her radio transmitter

for maximum sending. Out sped the dots and dashes that represented the space call for help. She paused; listened intently. No answering call. She sent again.

Slowly, inexorably, speed dropped. Twenty-one hours after she had commenced this mad venture the pointer hovered at two hundred miles a second. Exactly the maximum velocity which Kerry had told her could be wrung out of the *Flash*. Within minutes her own speed would fall below; and that would be that.

She set the distress signal at the automatic; so that it pulsed continuously out into space. Even that would eventually fail; as her stored current gave out. Without power, the flier began to drift. The pull of the nearer planets, of the entire universe, shifted it off the original course. Within an hour or two it would be even off the unfrequented Ganymede lane, and moving out into uncharted regions where no regular liner or space cargo boat ever ventured. Not even a prospector would have any reason to come out here.

Sally surveyed her situation. It was bad. She had enough food and drink for another two Earth days, if severely rationed. But she couldn't possibly last that long. Within a few hours the juice, severely drained by the steady radio signal, would break down; and with it, her re-oxygenation apparatus. Already her trained ear could hear the slight hesitation in its normal whir; and it seemed to her that she was finding difficulty in breathing. Or was that merely a psychological reaction to her predicament?

She faced the fact that she was going to die. Should she put an end to it now, without waiting for the inevitable agonies; or should she persevere for the outside chance? She decided on the latter. Then there was only one thing to do. Go to sleep. In repose her breathing would slow down, and the precious stock of air would last a bit longer. In the meantime the signal was pulsing. When that gave out—Sally shrugged: "Oh, well, it's been a good life while it lasted!"

Then she was dreaming: of little incidents in childhood, of her father, of Kerry.

The lights dimmed; the oxygen apparatus gave a sob and quit; the radio stopped sending. Her sleep thickened as the air grew foul; her dreams became frightening. Someone, something, was sitting on her chest, pressing . . . pressing . . .

Then even that passed; and a dark, silent ship moved decelerating on an erratic orbit.

It took Sparks almost twenty-eight hours out to put his sending and receiving equipment back into working order. Kerry Dale's calculated stumble had not only broken the screen, but fused tubes, wires and connections into shapeless metal.

Sparks sweated, grumbled and swore. What the hell was this all about? He had never shipped before with such a crazy captain as this Kerry Dale. Or *was* he crazy? Sparks remembered what had happened that time when they had wangled old Simeon Kenton out of that asteroid of pure thermatite. He, Sparks, had thought Dale crazy *then*.

But now! A sneaking suspicion had grown on Sparks that Kerry's flop into the screen had not been accidental. First, it had cut off what seemed to be the beginning of an important official announcement. The chairman of the Interplanetary Commission didn't usually appear in person to deliver a Commission order. Second, the mad haste to beat the noon gun in getting the *Flash* away from Megalon. Third, Kerry's whistling insouciance over the wreckage of the screen; and his smiling refusal to tell anyone where the devil they were going, and why. Fourth, the pushing of the old cargo boat to maximum speed, until every strut groaned and complained; as if —as if—yes, Sparks said it finally outright to himself—as if someone was pursuing them.

"There, Mr. Dale," Sparks said finally, as he mopped a

sweaty brow with a grimy hand. "She's working again. She really was a mess."

Kerry looked singularly unenthusiastic. "Is she?" he said rather absently. "That's good." Then he added: "By the way, Sparks. Don't answer any signals, calls or messages until you bring them first to me."

"Not even from the Space Patrol?"

"*Especially* not from the Space Patrol."

Spark's dried countenance took on a stubborn look. "But look here, Mr. Dale," he argued, "the regulations say—"

"I know what they say." Kerry sighed. Sparks was a valuable man, but he could be very trying. "Article 28, Subdivision B-3 of the Code declares that all craft in space *must* reply to the hail of an official Space Patrol cruiser, and heave to when so required for identification and examination."

"Aint that just what I'm telling you?" said Sparks triumphantly.

"But note the word official," continued Kerry imperturbably. "In the year 2247, Mr. Justice L'Hommedieu, sitting in the Court of Appeals, wrote a decision in a case where a ship had failed to answer the signal, had been fired on and smashed. He decreed full damages against the Commission. 'There have been recorded instances,' he said, 'in which space pirates have used the Patrol hail as a means for decoying victims within their grasp. Therefore it is necessary for a Patrol ship to identify itself properly as such after the failure to return its signal. It must proceed within visual distance, so that the signalee may have ample opportunity to detect visually the identification markings of the Patrol on its hull. Then it must repeat its demand for a response. Only *then*, after such second failure, may the Space Patrol use proper means to enforce its authority.' "

Kerry smiled persuasively. "Now do you think, Sparks, that all this could happen in the time it takes you to bring me a message?"

Jem, who had been listening attentively, burst into a loud chuckle at the radio operator's discomfiture. "By this time," he grinned, "you oughta know better than ta argue with Mr. Dale. Why, he's Mr. Law hisself!"

But Sparks, left to himself, kept grumbling. "Sometimes," he muttered, "it aint so good to know so damn much."

He fiddled idly with the controls. There was nothing showing, of course. One might go for days on the direct Ganymede run without raising a whisper. He leaned back to grumble some more. "On other ships," he said to himself, "the captain 'd let *me* handle communications. He *knew* I had the savvy and he didn't. But this fellow—"

He pricked up his ears suddenly. There was a faint *beep* from the transmitter. *Beep—be-eep—beep—be-eep—be-eep.*

Sparks stared at the visorscreen. It was blank. He rubbed his ears vigorously. Perhaps he had only imagined it. There it came again—the short, long, short, long, long. The distress call! But fainter even than before.

"Damn!" he swore, set the radar pickup to get position. The automatic calculator whirred. The call came from directly in back—the way they had come. But how far? The next set of calculations would show that.

But the machine stopped suddenly; the signal had died out. Sparks frantically pushed his power to the limit. No go! The signal was dead.

With an oath he pushed back his seat, hurried forward. "Mr. Dale," he said, "I've just picked up a signal."

"And came to me with it," approved Kerry. "Good! I see you know how to take orders."

"This was a call for help."

"Eh? Where from? What ship?"

Sparks mopped a fevered brow. "I dunno. It came in very faint; then, just as I set the radar, it died. I couldn't raise it again."

Kerry strode back to the screen. It was blank. "Didn't anything show at all?"

"Not a thing. I told you it sounded very faint. Must be too far away to come within our visual radius."

"Then damn it, man, how could we find it, even if it *was* a call." He looked hopefully at the radio man. "Perhaps it was space static. You know, meteors, bits of flotsam will sometimes echo an electrical emission from the sun."

Sparks drew himself up. "Sir, I know my business."

"I suppose you do," sighed Kerry. Going on a wild-goose search for a possible ship in distress would play hell with his time schedule. "But if we don't know where—"

"The radar made the first calculation. I got the vector of direction. It's in back of us."

"But how far?"

"I dunno."

This time Kerry mopped his brow. He saw both Sparks and Jem staring hard at him. What should he do? They were thirty-five million miles out from Earth. His receiving set had a range of ten million miles. Suppose the ship—if it *was* a ship—was that far back. That meant it would be near the Earth-Mars lane, and could get help much faster than from him. To retrace his steps the entire distance would mean that he had lost his chance at the comet. Certainly Foote would then beat him to it. And there was that Commission pronouncement he had so rashly broken off. It might very well have been a stop-order on any expedition to the celestial visitor. That would mean that the Space Patrol would be swarming to query all craft bound for distant points. He could in that event no longer claim that he had not received the order —which was the prime reason for breaking his screen—and he would be amenable to its provisions.

A little worried frown wrinkled Jem's forehead, brought a look of puzzlement into his eyes.

But then, thought Kerry, not noticing the frown in his pre-

occupation, suppose it *is* someone in trouble. If it were only a ship alone, or its freight, no matter how valuable. But men's lives!

He lifted his head. "All right, Jem," he said quietly. "Get the vector elements from Sparks and swing course around full speed ahead."

A delighted look replaced the worry on the face of the mate. "I *knowed* you'd be doin' just that," he exclaimed. Then, as Kerry did not smile back as he ordinarily would, Jem understood. "You mean this is goin' ta play the devil with whatever you had in mind?" he said softly.

Kerry said only: "Yes, Jem." Then he turned away.

For two hours the *Flash* drove steadily back, while Kerry paced restlessly up and down. Like hunting a needle in a haystack, he thought bitterly. He would stop every so often to query Sparks. "See anything yet?"

Sparks, glued to the screen, would shake his head. "Nothing yet, sir." And Kerry would resume his pacing.

Then Sparks suddenly whooped. "I've got it, sir. It must of drifted. It's off nine degrees on Plane Gamma."

There was a rush to the screen. A tiny dot, a mere speck, moved slightly across the glowing expanse.

"No wonder I couldn't see it!" exclaimed Sparks. "It's way too small for a ship."

"Ah!" said Kerry. "Then it's a meteor."

Sparks turned a miserable countenance toward him. "It could be," he admitted.

Kerry shrugged. "Well, as long as we're here, we might as well waste another half hour and investigate closer."

Within fifteen minutes the thing out in space took on a certain shape and form, though still too far away and too small to be definitely identifiable.

"Why," exploded Jem, straining his eyes. "You know what it looks like, Kerry?"

"What?"

"Like one of them little local one-seater jobs the fancy pants use to scoot to the moon."

"You're crazy. What would one of those be doing all the way out here?"

But in another five minutes, as the drifting object grew on the sight, there was no question about it.

Kerry blinked, stared, stared again. He grasped Jem's arm fiercely. "I *must* be going crazy," he said. "But doesn't—doesn't that look like Sally's—I mean Miss Kenton's flier?"

Jem looked steadily, gave vent to a prolonged whistle. "It could be," he admitted. "But then," he added quickly, "someone else might have a boat just like hers."

But Kerry was already shouting orders. "Break out the space suits. Turn on the magnetic plates. Get boarding tools ready."

The crew scurried to comply, while the *Flash* maneuvered alongside; always a delicate operation that took time and much handling.

The veins were pumping in Kerry's head. The crew worked fast; but he raged on them to move faster, to perform the impossible. He was certain by now that this was Sally's flier. It had been a special job; unique of its kind. What it—she—was doing out in space, was another matter.

He tried hard not to think as he poured himself into a space suit; ripped feverishly at the controls as the ungainly *Flash* latched on to the tiny flier with a little jar; flung into the airlock and pounded on the shiny port.

There was no answer from the interior. He groaned. Her radio might have gone dead; but when there came no manual response—

"The boarding tools!" he shouted in an awful voice. They handed them to him without a word. The perspiration trickled inside his suit as he swung, and swung again. Without interior juice to work the outer slide mechanism, it was necessary to hack one's way into the craft.

There was a dull crash as the mechanism splintered and a jagged hole was made sufficient to get at the interior lever. With a creak of shattered parts the port creaked ajar; then stuck half way. But it was sufficient for entrance.

Kerry plunged inside into total darkness, cried into his speech unit. "Sally! Sally!"

The sound echoed hollowly around. He opened the search-beam in his helmet. The clean white ray flooded the narrow interior.

With a great cry he lunged forward. In the pilot seat slumped a figure. Sally! Waxen pale, eyes shut, body and head at strange angles.

He caught her up feverishly in his arms, staggered back to the airlock. There other hands took her from him, carried her inside the *Flash*.

As he ripped off his suit, Jem was already setting up the oxygen tent.

"She's dead!" cried Kerry.

Jem averted his face. "We'll try the tent anyway."

They placed the poor slim body with its waxen face—beautiful even in its ghastly pallor—inside the tent, attached the artificial resuscitator to her arms, neck, bosom, mouth. The gas pumped in; the mechanical arms forced her arms up and down; pressure alternated on thorax and throat muscles; lungs were contracted and expanded.

Jem peered intently through the glassite panel. "There's no sign," he croaked. "She's—"

"Keep it up, man," cried Kerry fiercely. "Keep it up!"

Jem let out a yell. "I see a flicker; there's a patch o' color."

The mechanism pumped on; the life-giving gas surged in.

"Glory be!" shouted Jem. "She's opened her eyes."

Kerry felt suddenly limp. "Shut off the resuscitator," he ordered in a flat, inhuman voice. "Get her into a berth. Wrap her in well."

As they took Sally out of the tent, unstrapped the bands,

she opened her eyes. She saw Kerry leaning over her. She shut them again. "Oh!" she wailed, "the dreams are back."

Then a little smile tugged wanly at her lips. "But what a nice dream!" she whispered. And fell into a deep, regular sleep.

CHAPTER 11

SIMEON KENTON was in an excellent mood. All day long, at his office, he smiled, beamed, chuckled and spoke genially to his employees and to visitors until they became honestly concerned over the state of his mind, if not of his body.

"Old Fireball's not himself," said the second assistant secretary with a shake of his head to the third assistant freight manager. "I left out a *not* in a contract, and it'll cost the firm five thousand dollars. I expected to have my scalp lifted; but the old man just beamed—*beamed*, mind you—patted me on the shoulder, and said everyone makes mistakes. Do you think," he asked anxiously, "that he's getting soft in the head?"

"He did the same to me," nodded the third assistant freight manager. "I got two important shipments mixed up, and the old codger just laughed it off. It must be senility setting in."

They both contemplated the situation with expressions of gloom. "Who'd have thought it!" they sighed simultaneously.

But Simeon, in his private sanctum, was completely unaware of the deleterious effects his revolutionary good nature

had on the morale of his subordinates. He continued to chuckle and rub his hands gleefully. He had put in a good day's work—or rather, a night's work. For he hadn't yet gone to bed.

"Ha! Har-rumph!" he kept chuckling and snorting to himself. "That'll fix those blitherskites. They thought they'd steal a march on me, did they—*me*, Simeon Kenton! That'll teach 'em. I wish I could see their faces. That leohippus Foote I could always lick with one hand tied. But that young scalawig, Kerry Dale, was getting too big for his boots. He tricked me twice and tried to do it again. Jumped the gun at the space port, did he? Well, he'll have to come back dragging his tail in a sling. An' wait till they both find out I sewed up every racing ship on Earth and Mars early this morning *before* the Commission announced its ruling. Ha! Ha! That there comet is as good as in my lap right now."

His unwonted good humor lasted all through the day. An unimportant caller dropped in at five o'clock without an appointment just as he was preparing to depart for home. Instead of sounding off in no uncertain terms and throwing the unfortunate visitor out of the office, he actually invited him to dine with him at a nearby restaurant, and listened patiently to his rambling tale of woe over the steak and liqueurs. So that it was after seven when his private flier deposited him on the palatial grounds of his estate outside Megalon.

"Wait'll Sally hears what I've done," he thought gleefully as the butler ceremoniously ushered him in. "Ask Miss Sally to come to my room, Kibbers," he said to the butler.

"Miss Kenton isn't at home," returned the man.

"Eh? Where is she?"

"We don't know, sir."

Now Sally was a pretty independent young lady, and fairly free in her comings and goings. So old Simeon thought nothing of it at the moment. "All right, Kibbers," he said. "Tell her I want to see her as soon as she comes in."

"Yes, Mr. Kenton."

He proceeded to his own room, dived into the adjoining swimming pool, dried himself, and came out feeling fine. He needed a comb and went to the dresser for it. A white square envelope caught his eye. His name was on the outside, in Sally's well-known smooth, slanting hand.

"Ha!" he grunted. "What's this? It aint my birthday—or is it?"

He opened the missive. As his eye traveled down the neat script he started, glared, while the sparks seemed to fly from his wispy white hair and beard. The note read:

"If I'm not home by the time you read this, don't worry. What I did to Kerry is on my conscience. Particularly when I found he had taken off before he heard the Commission ruling. It seemed to me his receiving set was broken. Now I want to play fair; give him the same chance at the comet that you have. I'm therefore going out after him to give him the news and get him to come back. Should catch up with him in a few hours. See you when I return. Love, Sally."

Had the worried employees of Kenton Space Enterprises, Unlimited, been able to see their fiery boss just then they would have been much relieved. For the air turned blue with twisted expletives; he howled and pranced about the room in his most familiar fashion. Then he rushed to the visorscreen.

An official of the space-port grew on the screen. "Ah, yes, Mr. Kenton?" He was not the one who had previously been on duty.

"Did my daughter take off from your blithering port today?"

"If you'll wait just a moment, sir, I'll check the records."

The moment passed while Kenton glared at the vacant screen and vented his finest assortment of mixed metaphors. Then the official was on again.

"Yes, sir, she did. Blasted off at 5:30 P. M. in her private flier."

"Where for?"

"There's no clearance, sir; so it must have been a local flight."

Old Simeon did a little jig of rage. "That was no local flight, you soncarned idiot!" he howled. "Why didn't you stop her?"

The startled official said weakly: "I—I wasn't on duty then."

"Then put the slithering imbecile on who *was*."

"Er—he's not here now. As a matter of fact, he departed suddenly on his vacation about two hours ago."

But Simeon had already shut him off, tuned in Intercommunications. "Get me a connection with my daughter's flier," he howled.

"Yes, sir, where is it?"

"How in the dithering blazes do I know? Out in space somewhere?"

Minutes passed; an hour. Every two minutes he called Intercommunications impatiently; always to hear the same response. "Sorry, sir. We can't raise the ship. It must be out of range."

At the end of the hour, reason got the better of rage and pride. "All right then, get me that ripscallion Dale."

"I beg your pardon, sir?"

"What's the matter, are you deaf?" he shouted. "Kerry Dale on the *Flash*."

But the *Flash* could not be raised either. It took the apoplectic Simeon another half hour to remember that the note had mentioned the possibility that the *Flash's* set might be out of order.

By this time it was ten at night. Simeon had grown seriously alarmed. The one-seater was a swift little craft, but not geared for lengthy space flights. He called the Space Patrol.

Immediately there was terrific activity. Two fast ships scoured the spaceways; a general call went out to watch for the missing craft.

At three in the morning, the Mars-Earth liner reported they had sighted a small ship answering to the general description of the flier. It had failed to answer signal, and seemed to be cutting over to the Ganymede lane. About six million miles out.

But after that there was silence. Space crackled with frantic queries. Patrol ships put out from Mars for the unfrequented lane. Planets on Ceres was put on notice. So was Ganymede. It was a double search now—both for Sally and for the *Flash*.

Space, however, seemed to have swallowed them both up.

Old Simeon did not sleep that night either. Early in the morning the reporters came in droves. He threw them out. Fifteen-minute bulletins were solemnly read by the newscasters. All were to the same effect: "Nothing has been heard of Miss Kenton or Mr. Dale, in spite of the most gigantic search ever undertaken in interplanetary space. Stay tuned to this station for further bulletins."

By noon Kenton was a wisp of his former self. He swallowed his pride still further. "Get hold of Jericho Foote," he whispered hoarsely. His voice was gone. "He's on his way to Ganymede."

Foote's private cruiser was half way between Mars and the Asteroid Belt when the Space Patrol call came in.

That worthy, head of Mammoth Exploitations, and Kenton's chief rival, had been in high good humor; if what he felt could be called that. His dark, twisted visage wreathed itself in a perpetual grimace which passed with him for a smile. Even the reception of the Commission's pronouncement on Comet X startled him only momentarily. Then he simply sneered. "Not bad! Not bad!" he rubbed his oily hands. "It 'll only keep competition away until it's too late. That means my—um—men will have a free field."

His plan of action was exceedingly simple. To return and obey the Commission's orders would have been silly. By this

time, he rightly surmised, Kenton must have commandeered the fastest ships in the System. He himself would have done the same had he been on the ground. But what was the sense in filing legally on a comet with an orbit of over two thousand years? Whatever was of value on it would have to be taken out in a mighty short time—actually, on its swing around the sun and back again—at the most—as far as Saturn. No one had ever ventured beyond that ringed planet; and mighty few had been daring enough to go that far. The last outpost stations of the System were on the planets of Jupiter.

And even in that swing, the time for actual exploitation was limited. The last cometary swerve around the sun would bring it so close to the central fires as to make it a fiery hell, impossible to work. The best time was now—at least when he got out there—when the comet would be somewhere between Saturn and Jupiter. A wolfish grin showed his stained teeth. Yes, that Commission directive was an unexpected blessing. While the others were twiddling their thumbs for two weeks, and then taking another week or so to race to the oncoming comet, *he* would have already stripped it; or at least taken off the cream.

The Commission? He snapped his fingers contemptuously. Those dodoes would have nothing on him, Jericho Foote. The space outlaws who had served him before would serve him again. He wouldn't even appear in the picture. True, they had failed on that highjacking of the thermatite asteroid. But that hadn't been their fault. His face darkened, and his hand went to the ragged scar across it. Kerry Dale! Simeon Kenton! Some day he'd get even with them both.

Then had come the frantic search messages winging across space. They restored his good humor. So Sally Kenton was lost! "I hope they never find her," he snarled to himself. The next batch of messages threw him into a momentary fear, though. Kerry Dale was on the way to Ganymede, was he? He

remembered their meeting outside Wilson's office. That meant he had figured out the same thing about the comet that he, Foote had. Foote hated Dale, but had also a healthy respect for his resourcefulness and ingenuity. But a moment's reflection restored his aplomb. "Bah! I started twelve hours ahead of him, and this boat is much faster than that old tub of his. My—hem—men will be on the comet and off long before he could ever reach it. Besides, he'll have to obey the order and turn back. He has no—hum—men to take the blame for him. Hee! Hee!"

When the Space Patrol inquiry came through, he was most self-possessed. Seen anything of the *Flash* or Miss Kenton? Of course not. How could he? He had started from Megalon many hours before either of them; and his cruiser, if he *did* say so himself, was pretty speedy. Where was he, Jericho Foote, heading?

He drew himself as erect as he was constitutionally able. To Ganymede. Business. His papers were in order. Why did the Space Control see fit to question such a—ahem—respectable citizen as himself?

The Patrol officer was immediately apologetic. Sorry, it was just routine. Did he by any chance have any ideas about what had happened to the missing couple?

Foote smiled craftily. "Well," he said, after due thought, "perhaps—they might have eloped—you know how stubborn old Kenton can be. Or maybe—hmm, yes—young Dale might have kidnapped the girl. After all, she's heiress to millions."

The Patrol officer was flabbergasted. He did not dare report this conversation to his home base. But the Intersystem outfit had sent a reporter on the Patrol ship. "Wow!" he exclaimed under his breath. "That baby's *really* looking for trouble. One memento from Old Fireball's cane wasn't enough for him."

He couldn't send an open message to his office. The Patrol officer wouldn't have permitted it. But he packed the ex-

plosive information into a code which, on the face of it, seemed merely a routine report. Within an hour the newscasters were spreading Foote's remarks all over the System.

This time, both servants and doctors became truly alarmed over Simeon's condition. He seemed on the verge of a stroke. Perhaps he would have had one, had not a message relayed from Planets opportunely arrived at the Megalon office of the Space Patrol. One look at it and the Chief of Staff got hurriedly into his official car and flew directly to the Kenton estate.

There he found the old man gasping for breath and purple in color. Two doctors were working on him with restoratives. He barged in, speaking rapidly: "Your daughter has been found, Mr. Kenton."

Old Simeon started up. "Safe?"

"Safe and sound."

"Where the devil—"

The Patrol Chief looked significantly at the doctors and the crowding servants.

"Clear out!" shouted Kenton. "All of you."

One of the doctors protested. "You're allowing yourself to get excited again, Mr. Kenton. We can't be responsible—"

"Who's asking you to?" yelled Simeon. "And how dare you call me excited! Out with you all!"

When they were alone, the Patrol Chief handed him a message blank. "This has just come through from Planets," he exclaimed.

Simeon grabbed it with a trembling hand. It said:

> Simeon Kenton,
> Megalon, Earth.
> Dear Dad:
>
> Terribly sorry, but couldn't have let you know earlier. The *Iris* [her flier] ran out of fuel and power. Oxygenation stopped. I blacked out. Luckily, Kerry

Dale—remember him?—picked up my last call for help. Came back and found me. I'm all right. So is he. It may take time for my return to Earth. *Please don't worry.* Love.

SALLY.

"Thank God!" breathed Kenton fervently. Then he stared at the Chief. "But where—how—did this come from Planets? Can't one of your ships get hold of the *Flash* and take her off?"

"It's a curious business," said the Chief. He frowned. "I don't understand it all myself." Privately, he was convinced that Foote's wild shot in the dark had been correct; that the pair were eloping. But he didn't dare say it outright to Sally's father.

Aloud he said: "A cargo ship picked up this message while traveling from the Asteroid Belt. The captain says he was considerably out of the regular lane at the time because he wanted to investigate a small asteroid which he had been told might prove valuable. Anyway, he heard a signal, faint and far off. He replied. The signal identified itself as the *Flash*, Mr. Dale on board. Dale asked if he would relay a message for him to Planets. The captain said he would. Then this came through."

"Ah!" Kenton exhaled slowly. "Then how do we know that—?" He stopped short.

The Chief smiled. "That Miss Kenton was actually on board?" he finished the old man's uncompleted sentence. "Miss Kenton herself delivered the actual message. It's true the captain could not see her on the screen. But that, he explained, was because the *Flash* was evidently out of visual range. He swears however that it was her voice. He had heard your daughter on the telecasts."

Old Simeon stared at the message again. *It may take time for my return to Earth.* What the devil did that mean?

Couldn't Dale have transferred Sally to the cargo ship, or mentioned that he was taking her to Planets? And why wasn't he turning back now that he knew his mission was in vain? What was going on anyway?

He swung on the waiting Patrol Chief. "Will you call up Planets at once and get them to send out a ship to take off my daughter?"

The Chief's face was sober. "The Planets station has already acted on its own initiative. But they can't find the *Flash*. They can't even establish communication with her."

Kenton stared. "But that's impossible!" he said violently. "Dale's got an old slow tub. Your ships are three times as fast. He's on the Ganymede lane; you've had three cruisers scouring that lane."

"He's on it no longer," said the Chief slowly. "The Patrol boats have already searched the area thoroughly."

There was a moment's silence. "You mean—he's deliberately swung off, and won't reply to calls?"

The Chief found a most interesting object at the other end of the room to stare at. "It looks that way," he admitted finally. "Our cruisers have been given orders to swing out in wide circles." He looked squarely at the old man now. "But space is pretty big, Mr. Kenton, once you get off the lanes."

For the first time old Simeon could see what the Chief was thinking; what Foote had been thinking; what the whole dad-blamed System by now must be thinking.

He walked over to the screen, switched it on. Central Operator appeared. "Get me Clem Borden," he snapped, "and get him fast."

"Borden?" interjected the Chief. "Isn't that the racer who won the Interplanetary Cup last year?"

"The same," grunted Kenton.

Then a youngish, wiry, space-tanned individual moved on the screen. "Oh, hello, Mr. Kenton. You want me?"

"Clem," said Simeon, "it's now 3 P. M. I want your *Dei-*

mos ready by 6 P. M., jampacked with every drum of fuel and every ounce of food you can stow on board. We're taking off on a very long trip."

The racer was astounded. "It's impossible, Mr. Kenton," he said firmly. "That's too short notice."

"Nothing is impossible," yelled Simeon. "Look at your contract of charter. It says you're to be ready on demand. Well, I'm demanding right now."

"But I thought you weren't starting until the Commission—"

"Dingblast the Commission! Look, Clem, I'll take care of the fuel and the food. Just you get the ship tuned up and ready."

"But a crew can't be assembled—"

"*I'll* be the crew. Don't you think I'm capable? Why, when I was a young man—"

A light dawned on the racer. He also had been listening to the newscasts. In fact, all other news had been crowded off the waves. "Okay, Mr. Kenton," he said suddenly. "I'll be ready. I sympathize—"

"Blast your sympathy!" howled Kenton. "You just be ready on time!"

The Chief protested. "Look here, Mr. Kenton. Don't you think you'd better leave this to the Patrol? After all—"

"No," howled old Simeon. "It's my daughter, and that skittleskewed young Dale is cooking up something that 'll land 'em both in a dadscrambled mess. Your Patrol has foozled the job, aint they? Well, Simeon Kenton will find 'em or—"

Looking at the tornado of human energy that was disrespectfully known as Old Fireball, the Chief was compelled to admit to himself that he damn well might.

CHAPTER 12

SPARKS was a beaten man. He kept staring at the empty visorscreen and wailed miserably to himself. "They'll take my license away for this."

Twice the Patrol signal had come in, and twice Kerry Dale had peremptorily refused to answer it.

Each time Kerry merely asked: "Were you able to identify the Patrol ship?"

"Not visually, if that's what you mean."

"It's *exactly* what I mean."

"But," protested Sparks with the feeling that he had done this before—and in vain, "they're out of visual range. And you know as well as I that it's a Patrol boat."

"I know nothing of the sort," said Kerry with a straight face. "It may be a pirate decoy. You forget, Sparks," he added gravely, "that highjacking gang of Foote's. It's thought to be hiding out somewhere in the Belt."

"Oh!" Sparks flung up his hands and confessed himself defeated. But he continued to mutter and complain to himself.

Kerry went to see Sally. She was completely over her near-tragic experience; and she was, as Kerry was compelled to confess, more ravishingly beautiful than ever.

"You're demoralizing my crew," he told her severely. "Instead of keeping their eyes on their jobs, they just gape and moon at you."

"As though I were a two-headed calf," she dimpled. "They'll soon get over me."

"But *I* won't."

"That's what I like to hear."

The young man groaned. "Will you be serious!" he exclaimed. "It was a crazy stunt coming after me."

"It's crazier for you not to turn back," she retorted. "You'll lose any chance you may have had to file on the comet."

"No. I'm going on."

"You have some trick up your sleeve," she accused.

"Maybe."

"And you won't tell it to me?"

"No," he said frankly. "A secret is a secret only as long as only *one* person knows it. But look, Sally, you should have let me put you on that cargo ship. Your father—"

"He knows I'm safe. Or am I?"

He deliberately mistook her meaning. "You may not be," he said. "I don't know what we're liable to run into. And remember, you told me Foote came out ahead of me. He's thoroughly unscrupulous. There may be—well—"

Sally's eyes danced. "A fight? I'd love that. Things were much too quiet back on Earth. If you'll give me a ray gun—"

He groaned and, like Sparks, confessed himself beaten.

Had he dared land at Planets, he would have deposited her there willynilly. But then he would have had no excuse that he hadn't heard the Commission directive. And doubtless they'd detain him for investigation. As it was he had lost enough time by turning back to rescue Sally, and by swinging way out of his course into uncharted space to avoid being pursued by the Patrol. He hadn't told Jem or anyone else yet; but he was *not* going to land on Ganymede. The same situation would apply there. He was heading directly for the comet.

The *Flash* moved steadily on. Day after day. Space was empty, hollow. The sun receded to a small pale disk; Earth had long since vanished to the naked eye. Not a ship was seen; not even a vagrant asteroid. All signals had ceased. Even the powerful Patrol sets couldn't send this far. Jupiter, with its great red spot, loomed to the left and began to recede.

The crew looked restless and muttered among themselves. Jem came to Kerry and cleared his throat. "I've been steering by your orders, Kerry, without asking no questions. But we're goin' *away* from Ganymede, an' we're passing Jupiter. The crew's getting mighty uneasy. No ship's ever gone this way before." He looked earnestly at his chief. "I think it's time," he said, "to let the crew in on what ye're doing. Otherwise ye're liable ta have a first-class mutiny on your hands."

Kerry grinned. "All right, Jem. I agree with you. It *is* time." He led the puzzled mate to the observation telescope. "You see that comet, Jem?"

Jem stared. Comet X lay like a fiery tadpole across ten degrees of arc. Its head burned with a peculiar white iridescence; its tail was a flaming orange scimitar. "Yes," he said finally, "I been seeing it a long time. What about it?"

"We're going there."

Jem looked disgustedly at his boss. "And why, might I ask," he demanded, "are we going to a blooming comet? A handful o' dust, gas an' emptiness."

Kerry explained what he had heard from the astronomer, Wilson.

Jem whistled. "A solid head, hey! Elements not found in the System?" Then he scratched his head. "That's okay. But why're ye so all-fired afraid to meet anyone? Why were we skulkin' along back alleys, so to speak?"

Then Kerry told him the rest of the story; of the leakage of the secret and the Commission's order bringing all starters back to scratch.

"And ye're going ahead regardless?" exclaimed Jem.

"Yes."

Jem stared a moment; then his eye twinkled. "Aha! You've got some of your legal tricks up your sleeve."

Kerry grinned in exchange. "Maybe I have. Now you can tell the boys what we're up to. You can promise them a cut on whatever we find."

"They'll love that," crowed Jem.

"Oh, by the way. Don't say anything about the Commission order."

Jem winked broadly. "I won't."

"Another thing. You'd better start breaking out our . . . er . . . rayguns and atomic weapons."

The mate stopped short. "Oh, oh! You're thinking there may be life on the comet?"

"No; vermin. I have reason to believe Jericho Foote got ahead of me. He won't have guts enough to come out here himself; but I have a hunch he's sending that bunch of outlaws he's got on the string."

Jem chuckled, rubbed his hands. "I've been spoiling to meet up with those birds. Don't ye worry, Kerry, our boys 'll take care of themselves." Then he stopped, rubbed his chin. "But how about Miss Sally?"

"I don't know. It's been bothering me right along. Oh well, we'll have to take as few chances as possible."

"Bah!" growled Jem to himself as he turned away. "She's a swell dame, but why the devil didn' she stay at home?"

Sally didn't seem to worry. Her eyes sparkled, and she had the crew eating out of her hand. She had taken only an overnight bag with her; but through some magic known only to herself, she always managed to look freshly groomed and with a change of costume.

The men were on their toes now, joking, thronging at every off-moment to the observation port to watch the fast-growing comet. The news that there might be a gang of outlaws ahead

of them didn't bother them one bit. In fact, they remembered what the gang had done to Captain Ball; and they had a score to settle with cutthroats who were callous enough to set a crew helplessly adrift in space to almost certain death. They fastened their weapons grimly to their belts.

Even Sally sported a raygun. When Kerry expostulated, she laughed gayly. "Oh, you don't know me, sir. I'm no helpless female. I've taken prizes for sharpshooting in the Megalon tournaments."

"But this may be no tournament, Sally."

She looked at him steadily. "I'm not afraid of danger, Kerry," she said. "If I had been, I wouldn't have taken that desperate trip after you."

That was true, he thought. With her color heightened and her eyes sparkling, she looked like—what did that early composer of almost forgotten operas call them? Oh, yes, Valkyries.

Comet X was now a glorious sight. It spread half across space; its tail glowing and coruscating with a million colors. Yet the stars shone steadily behind the glowing curtain, disclosing its near-vacuum of repelled infinitesimal particles.

The head, however, was another matter. Surrounded by its own veil of iridescent gas, the solid core was now a perceptible disk of pure white, shimmering with a life all its own.

"That light is self-emitting," thought Kerry. "Wilson was right; this is no reflection or ionization induced by the sun."

He turned the spectroscope on the core, studied the pattern of bright lines and dark. No; they didn't fit any of the elements hitherto known to man. He tried the delicate heat-gatherer. The comet was icy cold; close to the frigidity of space. His excitement grew. "That means," he told Sally who was watching him work, "it's some form of intense radio-activity." He calculated the mass; and stared at the results. "By heavens, Sally!" he exclaimed, "this is *really* something new. Either its basic material is under tremendous pressures almost of the order of

the dwarf stars, or it's the heaviest thing ever found. The atomic weight runs to about 562; just double that of para-plutonium."

"What does that mean, Kerry?"

He got up, paced the narrow deck. "That means," he said slowly, "a new form of intra-atomic energy, to which our old forms will seem as primitive as the hydrogen bomb of the infancy of research seems to us."

Sally was silent a moment. "Then this is something bigger than mere private exploitation," she said slowly.

"Yes, it is. But," he frowned, "the law says nothing of that. And by the time that the Council could get around to it, and all the legal redtape be unwound that safeguards our liberties, Comet X will be far out in space again, and lost forever to us."

"I thought Wilson said," the girl protested, "that it had an elliptical orbit."

"Of two thousand odd years," grinned Kerry. "However, he advanced that merely as a hypothesis. He was wrong. I've been checking positions right along. Comet X is on a true parabola —one of the rarest orbits in the universe. It's a complete stranger to our System. It's come from God knows what other universe in space."

"Then—then—" she faltered, "there'll be only a few short weeks to get out whatever we can."

"A week at the most now," he corrected. "And another week on its outward swing. The comet is accelerating rapidly as it gets the tug of the sun. Once inside the orbit of Venus, it'll be too hot to handle."

"Oh!" she wailed. "Then my father's getting the Commission to hold everyone back for two weeks may cause incalculable damage."

"He meant well, Sally." Kerry grinned and added: "For himself."

"So we're the only ones to find what there is to be found."

"And Foote's gang," he reminded her. Kerry's voice hard-

ened. "Now I have added reasons, if I needed any, to see to it that they don't succeed."

"But how—"

Jem came up. "We'll be right on top of her in three hours," he said cheerfully. "What 're your orders?"

"Break out those new space-suits, Jem. Have every man get into one."

"Do I rate one?" asked Sally.

Kerry surveyed her trim form. "Most decidedly. We're sure to hit radiations of terrific intensity. I only hope they stand up."

Jem said sotto-voce: "How about our space cannon. Shouldn't we load her now?"

"By all means. We've got to be prepared for any eventuality."

As the comet seemed to swell more and more rapidly on the sight, excitement grew to fever pitch on the *Flash*. Even Sparks forgot his forebodings and scanned his instruments with a mounting intensity. He was having trouble, he reported. The radiations were causing the screen to glitter and spark as though a million fireflies were playing tag across it.

"That's not so bad," commented Kerry. "If we can't see the other fellow, then he won't be able to see *us*. Better forget about the screen, Sparks. Use the visual telescope instead. Sometimes," he grinned, "more primitive methods work when the latest weapons of science don't."

It was tricky work pulling alongside. They had met the comet head-on, and they had to swing in a huge series of concentric spirals, constantly narrowing, in order to bring the *Flash* safely down to the core.

They were about five thousand miles from the surface, on their next to the last swing, when Sparks, his eyes glued to the telescope, yelled out: "I see something, Mr. Dale."

The big salvage boat was butting its way through the outer

veil that surrounded the inner core. It was like traveling through an iridescent fog, made dangerous by the intermittent smack of solid meteor-like particles as they collided with the ship. Fortunately, the particles were small and the hull a sturdy duralinium. One never knew, however, when a larger mass might not come careening out of the fog and really crash.

Kerry hurried over. "What do you see, Sparks?"

"I think I see—yes, by God, I do! There's a ship anchored down there!"

"That must be Foote's outlaws!" cried Sally excitedly.

"No doubt about it," said Kerry grimly. "Can you see any signs of activity, Sparks?"

"We're too far away, sir. But there's something very curious. Maybe you'd better take a look for yourself."

Kerry took over, glued his eye to the instrument. There was the ship all right; a black oval bug motionless on the surface. But at the moment that didn't seem important. It lay on the edge of what seemed to be a dazzling, blinding circular lake. Even at this distance, and filtered though it was by the enwrapping fog, the glare was so great that it sprayed in every direction like a tremendous fountain of inexhaustible fireworks.

So intense was the fiery white blaze that Kerry was compelled to withdraw his gaze and blink the protective tears from his eyes.

"What did you see?" asked Sally.

"Something that knocks my calculations into a cocked hat. The whole planetoid isn't radiating, as I previously thought. Most of it looks like the normal thing—stone, slag, perhaps heavy metals. But there's one spot—about half a mile in diameter—that's the center of some enormous radiant activity. It's *that* we've been getting in our instruments."

Jem ran up. "We're ready to land, Kerry."

"Everyone in space suits?"

"Yes; and helmets ready to snap into position at a moment's notice."

"Good! Now we have to be careful, Jem. We've not only got unknown radiations to worry about; but Foote's men are already down there."

The mate fingered the projectile gun at his waist. His eyes brightened. "Do we rush 'em right away?" he asked.

"No. You're to set the *Flash* down about five miles away. I saw what looked like a hollow crater. It will make a good hiding place. Swing around to it from the farther side. I'll direct you."

The other side of the comet was bathed in a softer light; as if, thought Kerry, the radiations boiling up from the pool on the opposite side had spread in an even atmospheric layer around the tiny orb.

Jem set the ship down skilfully. He skimmed low to avoid detection from the outlaw craft, cutting his rear rockets and applying the forward jets in short bursts for braking action and with a minimum of fiery exhaust.

While every man was busy with the multiple duties necessitated by the delicacy and perfect timing required by the landing, Sally was eagerly scanning the surface beneath.

"This is very curious, Kerry," she exclaimed suddenly.

The young captain paused briefly. "What is?" he asked.

Still peering through the observation port, and without turning her head, she called out: "The surface has an artificial look. It's laid out in huge octagons, like a mosaic all fitted together. Good Heavens! And that looks like—"

What she was going to add was lost in the last-second rush of landing. The walls of a circular crater loomed ahead; the ship lifted slightly to clear them; then dipped again to settle several hundred feet down on what seemed to be an absolutely level floor.

CHAPTER 13

AS THE SHIP quivered to rest, everyone rushed to the observation port and stared out. For a moment there was sheer stunned silence; then came gasps of unbelieving astonishment.

"Why, we're in a city," exclaimed Kerry, "a great, dead city!"

"That's what I was trying to tell you," said Sally excitedly. "The surface outside is artificial. A mosaic of octagons, with octagonal towers spaced at intervals."

Jem looked scared. "Man an' boy," he said shakily, "I've been on the spaceways, from Venus to Jupeeter. But I aint ever seen nothin' like this. Mebbe we'd better take off again. *They* mightn't like our being here."

Kerry stared. "*They*? Oh you mean the . . . uh . . . beings who built this city. I don't see anything stirring."

The mate shivered. "That's what makes it so—funny. Me, I'd be easier in mind if I'd *see* what I was up against."

"Well, we'll find out fast enough." It was strange but true. The unbelievable sight had wiped from everyone's mind the mission on which they had come; even the presence of the outlaw ship a bare five Earth miles away.

Orders crackled. "Clamp helmets tight; make sure space

suits are sealed. Check your communication units. Have weapons ready for swift use; but under no circumstances ray or shoot anything unless I give the word. Sparks; you stay on board and keep watch. Jem, you stay on also with Sally. If anything happens to the rest of us, take off immediately, and raise Ganymede as fast as you can."

Two vehement protests cut Kerry short in midflight. "I'll do nothing of the sort, Mr. Kerry Dale!" cried Sally, cheeks aflame. With an irrevocable gesture she snapped her helmet shut. Through the communication unit came the rest: "I'm going along."

Jem said: "So you think I'm scairt? Well, you're right. I am, by God! But I'm goin' with ye jest the same." And *he* snapped his helmet into position.

"Mutiny!" groaned Kerry. "All right, you win now; but remember, after this is over, you both go to the brig on bread and water." He swung on one of the crew. "Bill, this is an order. *You* stay on board with Sparks." He shifted his glare to another of the men. "And you too, Alf! The two of you and Sparks ought to be able to maneuver the ship. If we run into trouble, help us if you can. Bill knows how to handle the space cannon. But don't shoot unless I signal. If you find we're sunk, though, again I say, get to Ganymede and the Space Patrol. This thing is bigger than any of our lives." He turned a last time to Sally. "And that means you too. Last chance; won't you stay on board?"

Through the glassite visor her eyes danced. "The answer, my dear Kerry, is again *no*!"

He made a helpless gesture. "Very well, then. Adjust your gravity disks to Moon gravity. This world is tiny, but its mass is about the same. Open the space lock and make sure it's fast behind us. Sparks, keep in constant communication with us. Bill, stay at the cannon. Alf, watch the interior radiation counter. If it begins to act up, all of you get into your suits. I don't know how penetrating these rays are, or how deadly."

As the ungainly figures marched into the space lock, Sparks said with unwonted solemnity: "God keep you all, sir."

"Amen!"

The air rushed into the lock as they entered. The port closed behind and opened in front.

"That's strange!" muttered Kerry.

"What is?" asked Sally.

"The air isn't stirring. It ought to be whooshing out into the vacuum. I wonder!"

He fumbled in the flap of his rubberoid suit, took out a slim transparent pencil. He unscrewed one end; watched it eagerly. Half the transparency clouded swiftly; then, more slowly, turned to a deep vermilion.

"Oxygen!" he shouted unbelievingly. Feverishly he unscrewed the other end. With withheld breaths the others crowded around, watching the second slim chamber of the analyzer. The seconds passed; then one minute and still another. Nothing happened.

Kerry shook his head even more unbelievingly. "No sign of any poisonous elements. This is incredible. How could an atmosphere stick on a little world like this?"

Sally jumped the little distance to the ground, fell heavily. Kerry jumped in alarm after her, and fell with bruising force. "What the—!"

The girl's muffled voice came to him. "We're too heavy," she cried. "Our gravity disks!"

As in an ancient slow-motion picture she fumbled at the controls. Kerry did likewise. There was an almost insupportable weight on his arms. The next minute both got up off the ground, stared at each other.

"This is getting more and more fantastic," said Kerry in an awed voice. "The gravity is of the order of the Earth's. The air is like that of the Earth."

"That's splendid!" laughed Sally. And, before Kerry could

lunge forward to stop her, she had pushed her helmet clear and her warm, breathing countenance and bright, tousled hair were exposed to the elements of this strange new world.

"Sally!" cried Kerry desperately. "The radiations! We don't know—they may be deadly!"

She laughed again and shook her head to get stray locks from her eyes. She breathed deeply. "Nonsense! It's wonderful! Like the freshest mountain ozone. And warm, too!"

"Oh, well," thought Kerry with a sickening sensation. "If she is going to die; then I might as well, too."

With a gesture born of despair, he removed his helmet, inhaled hard.

It *was* air; keen yet soft, tingling with a heady, vinous quality. The atmosphere danced with myriads of little sparkles; overhead, across the smoothly slanting walls of the crater, he could see bright waves of radiations flowing in endless current. They came, without doubt, from the gushing fountain some miles away.

The outlaws! Their mission!

But before he could think the thing through, he saw Jem and the others wrestling with their helmets. He stopped them with a stern command.

"Keep them on!" he ordered. "This air feels fine; but we still don't know what the end results will be. Just because Miss Kenton is reckless—"

The sparkles in the air glowed like fireflies in her hair. "I told you I was a guinea pig!" she laughed. "But look at all this. It's amazing! What do you make of it, Kerry?"

A city lay stretched before them; bathed in the darting light. The level floor was inlaid with metallic-shining octagons. Curious angular designs were deep-incised upon them. Great structures, all octagonal, and made of the same strange metal, reared in ordered configurations across the vast depression. As the waves of radiations beat upon them they glittered with an iri-

descence of many hues. There were no openings, no windows in their towering sides.

Slowly, cautiously, the exploratory party moved to the nearest one. The walls betrayed no sign of entrance.

Kerry said with a little catch in his voice: "Living beings built these; beings with a high order of intelligence and a profound knowledge of geometric forms and of engineering. But who they are—or were—where they came from, what they look like, I don't know."

Jem's helmeted head showed ashen. His lips worked. "And I don't *want* ta know," he mumbled. "I've met up with Venusian natives. But they're more like animals. These fellows, though—" He trailed off significantly.

"Must have vanished uncounted millions of years ago," Kerry assured him. "This little world came from some other universe. What broke it loose and sent it hurtling across the unfathomable reaches of space very likely we will never know. Perhaps it had something to do with that unending eruption of energy outside. If that was so, then the inhabitants probably abandoned their home and took off to some neighboring planet in their universe. It's been deserted, dead, for God knows what infinity of time."

"What a pity!" said Sally regretfully. "I would have loved to—"

She uttered an exclamation. She had been leaning against the metallic wall of the tower. Something seemed to give, and she disappeared with a scream.

Kerry darted forward frantically. The others rushed after him.

An oblong opening showed, black, forbidding. Kerry peered in. "Sally!" he shouted in terror. "Where are you?"

A faint, tremulous voice wafted up. "D-down here. I—I—must have tumbled down some sort of ramp. It—it's terribly dark."

Kerry snapped on his helmet; otherwise he couldn't work

the search-beam on top. But Jem's beam was already probing with long white light the black interior. At the tip of the ray they could see Sally struggling to her feet in a long tunnel.

They ran swiftly down the smooth ramp. Kerry caught the girl in his arms. "Are you hurt?"

"N-no. Just shocked a bit. I thought it was the end of me when I started to fall."

The past fear made him unduly stern. "All right. No more of this nonsense. Snap on your helmet, and obey orders from now on."

She stared at him; then, with surprising meekness, said tremulously, "Very well, Mr. Dale."

"Good!" Had he not been absorbed just then in what the search-beams showed, he might very well have been suspicious of Sally's sudden yielding. But gaping astonishment drove out any other thought. The tunnel opened suddenly in a vast interior, stretching up to the very height of the tower.

The walls glittered in the beams with a myriad hues—reds, greens, purples, blues, yellows, and colors never before seen by any of the beholders. Fantastic designs were worked out in tesselated segments—strange angular shapes that looked for all the world like some of the paintings of the Abstract School of the twentieth century, a few samples of which still lingered in Earth's museums.

Then Sally was pointing and crying out: "Look at what's all around us." Five search-beams went simultaneously level; picked out gigantic slabs of somber metal. There were dozens of them in the great interior; their sides unornamented and smooth. But on their flat top surfaces there seemed to be something.

Sally darted forward; flashed her beam down upon the nearest surface. She gave a little cry; shrank back.

Kerry was immediately at her side; his gloved fingers grimly clutching at his projectile-gun. Then he too cried out.

Lying full length upon the bare surface was a being! A being

who might have stemmed from Earth had it not been for his —or was it *her*—dimensions.

Delicately featured, slender-shaped, complete in every human detail, with gold-red hair lying in seemly folds down to the narrow shoulders, cheeks smooth and faintly tinged with pinkish flush, eyes closed as if in sleep—and only some three feet in length!

As if in sleep! Indeed, it seemed as if any moment the eyes would open, and the perfectly formed midget would arise and inquire in anger what did these strange intruders mean by barging in on its beauty nap.

Jem had been getting more and more jittery as they had proceeded in this curious world. So had his three ship mates. One of them now uttered a strangled cry, spun on his heel and started to run back up the tunnel ramp. His mates followed him in headlong rush. Only Jem, torn between superstitious fear and loyalty to Kerry, teetered indecisively.

"Come back!" thundered Kerry. "It's not alive. It's been dead billions of years."

Yet even he had been tempted to turn and flee. He was pretending a confidence of which he couldn't be sure.

The men paused, hesitated, and returned unwillingly. Then they all stared again. Kerry prodded the outstretched figure. It was metallic to the touch.

He breathed a huge sigh of relief. Had it yielded like flesh, for all his lack of superstition he might incontinently have gone from there. He laughed a little shaky laugh.

"It's an effigy," he explained. "A cunningly painted effigy to simulate life. Something like what you can find in the cathedrals still standing in ancient Europe."

Sally said: "Perhaps it's more like the Egyptian mummies. A case enclosing the dead body within."

"It might be," admitted Kerry. He stared around the place. "Look! There are dozens more like this one. It's a mausoleum."

"A mausoleum of a vanished race," breathed Sally, "from an

alien universe. She looked down at the painted tiny figures. "Why, they were beautiful!" she mused. "Like lovely little girls! What a pity they've gone!"

Jem glanced in wonder from the painted effigy toward Sally, and back again. Now that he knew that what he saw was not alive, his native courage had returned. "You know, Miss Sally," he exclaimed admiringly, "she might have been your kid sister."

"By Saturn!" said Kerry, starting. "You're right, Jem. The same straight features. Even the hair—"

"Stop dissecting us like that," cried Sally. "It—it's somehow ghoulish."

Kerry roused himself with an effort. "Well," he said, "we'd better leave this for the while. We've got other work—"

Sparks's voice resounded in his communication set. It was shrill with terror. "Mr. Dale! Mr. Dale!"

"What's the matter, Sparks?" he answered immediately.

"We're being attacked. The pirates! They're all about the rim! They're shooting down at us."

"Use your space cannon," shouted Kerry. "Tell Bill—"

Sparks's voice was chattering. "It—it's jammed. We're caught like rats!"

A huge concussion sounded in their helmets. A moment's dreadful silence. Then again Sparks's terrified cry. "They've dragged a space cannon over. That one dented our forward hull. They're getting ready to shoot again."

Jem whirled, unlimbered his ray-gun from his belt. "All right, boys!" he cried. "Let's get out there and give 'em what for!"

"Stop, you fool!" Kerry snapped. "They'd shoot us down like sitting ducks." Then to Sparks. "Blast off as fast as you can. If you can fix the cannon, circle back later and bomb their ship. If you can't, head toward Ganymede. Raise the Patrol and bring them back."

"B-but how about you—?"

"We'll make out. Get going before they reload."

The next few moments were like eternity. They crouched tensely, waiting . . . waiting . . .

Then came the roaring of rockets, followed in split seconds by another thunderous concussion. Another agonized second. Had Sparks managed to clear before the shot? Faint cries sounded in their sets. Then a lurid string of oaths. "The blarsted soandsos!" bellowed a strange voice. "They got away. They'll raise the Patrol."

"Stop your damn whining, Sims!" said another voice, sharp, authoritative, chilling in its ferocity. "It'll take them a week to get to Ganymede. By that time we'll be through here, and away."

Jem started to growl. Kerry stopped him with an unmistakable gesture for silence. This was a two-way business. If they could hear the pirates in their communication sets, then the pirates could hear *them*.

The man named Sims was chuckling now. "Ye're right, as always, boss. This here's the biggest bit o' swag we've ever tied into. Won't old Foote be tickled!"

"Hmm!" This was the leader called the Boss. "Foote, eh? Well, I don't know."

A third voice was heard. "Don't know what, boss?"

"Don't know about Foote. What if he *did* hire us. What's a measly hundred thousand, or even a million, to what we've got."

There was an uneasy silence; then Sims piped up: "Ya got somethin' there, boss. But Foote, he knows our hideout. Suppose he tips off the Patrol?"

"Let him!" The Boss's voice was edged with contempt. "You men don't know it—how could you? None of you have been scientifically trained the way I have. But those solid blocks we've been mining out are pure energy. What holds them together I don't know. But if they react the way I think they will, we've got unlimited power on tap; power to which all the power now generated in the System will look like a pop-

gun. Do you men know what that means? Power in a different sense; power over the entire System, and their blasted Interplanetary Councils and Commissions. They'll come whining to us, begging for mercy."

Once again that strange voice took on terrible overtones of ferocity. "That's when I'll step on their necks, bash their blasted faces in. *I'll* take over their System; *I'll* be handing out the orders; and they'll crawl to obey. *Me,* that they drove away as an outlaw years ago."

"You never told us nothin' like that," said the third voice. "What happened then, boss?"

"None of your damned business, Grant!" snarled the Boss viciously. "And don't be asking unnecessary questions."

"Okay, boss; okay!" said Grant hastily. "I didn't mean no harm."

"Then keep your mouth shut about what doesn't concern you. All right now; let's get back to our job."

"How about these funny looking buildings?" asked Sims timidly. "Maybe there's other stuff inside."

"Ah!" The Boss's voice was almost approving. "You've got a head on your shoulders, Sims. You're right. This place has all the earmarks of an advanced civilization. Who knows; they might already have mined out blocks of energy; and saved us the trouble. We'll go down and investigate."

In the ensuing silence, Kerry opened his helmet; motioned to the others to do the same. He didn't want their voices to be heard by the descending outlaws.

The crewmen's faces were grim and drawn. Even Sally looked scared. "What are we to do now?" she asked. "We're trapped. They'll find us—"

"Let's go out fighting," begged Jem. "If we blast 'em down, mebbe we kin grab their ship."

Kerry shook his head. "They've got a full complement. That means at least twenty-five men. That man they call the Boss sounds highly competent. He's been at this game too long to be

caught off guard. He'll have left some five men on board, with strict orders to keep watch. He's got about twenty with him. We might blast down half a dozen; even a dozen. The remainder will get *us*."

"But we'll only die here, Kerry," Jem argued. "They'll find us here, and block us up. Then we're sunk!"

"There's a chance of that," admitted Kerry. "But there's also a chance they won't spot this particular mausoleum. When and if they go away, we'll have to figure out some strategy to capture their ship. I'm going to replace my helmet, so I can listen in on what they're doing. But the rest of you keep them off; otherwise you won't be able to talk. I'll gesture to you in space code any orders I may have. Stay here, while I go up to the entrance and do a little spying." He looked severely at Sally. "This is an order. You're to stay with the others."

She inclined her head. "As you order, Captain Dale."

He stared at her suspiciously. She was doubtless mocking him. Well, that could wait. With a grunt he snapped his helmet shut and moved cautiously up the ramp. At the entrance orifice he peered carefully out.

Just as he had expected, there were over twenty in the pirate group, all space-suited and helmets down. Obviously they had not yet realized that there was breathable air on the little world.

They slithered down the steep incline, scattered and single. Kerry's finger itched on his projectile gun, even as he was compelled to approving comment. "Their leader knows his business," he muttered to himself. "Though he doesn't suspect that there's a live being around, he keeps his men scattered against any possibility of a single blast cutting them all down. If only," he added, "I knew which one he was. Shoot him down, and the others will run for it."

But there was no way of telling. Even when his voice came through the communication set, it could not be placed. Nor was there any differentiation in space suits or helmets.

They were hidden now, behind a neighboring tower. Muffled voices came to him.

"Bah!" growled one. "They's nothing but lousy walls. They must be solid clear through."

"Keep searching along the sides," ordered the Boss. "Whoever built these built them for a purpose. There *must* be an entrance."

A minute later there was an exclamation of fear, followed by a bedlam of excited voices. "Ah!" thought Kerry. "Someone has fallen into the mausoleum, just as Sally had done." That gave him an idea. If they all went inside, maybe it would be possible for his own little force to hold them inside; and eventually seal up the entrance. Then—

But his half-born scheme died swiftly. The Boss's voice was plain now. "All right! You five stand outside here as watch. The rest of us will descend."

Kerry cursed. That bird was certainly a tactician of no mean gifts, even though perverted to piracy. Who the devil was he? Kerry racked his memory. It was the rule of the Interplanetary Council to decree as legal outlaws all fugitives from justice. That meant that the branded one could be blasted down on sight by any citizen. But there had been many such decrees over the years; not as many, no doubt, as in the earlier and more turbulent eras of space travel; but enough to make identification of any one particular outlaw exceedingly difficult.

The metal of the great tower into which they had dived evidently blanked out communication. It had been fortunate that there had been a direct line of communication before through the open tunnel with the *Flash*. All he could hear was the conversation of the outer guards.

One of them was saying shakily: "Jeez! This here place gives me th' creeps! Supposin' some o' them birds what built this here town is still hangin' around?"

"Rats!" jeered another. "They been dead a long time. Aint you heard the Boss say so?"

"Yeah!" chimed in a third. "But I read onct in a book—when they made me go t' school—about a people back on Earth called 'Gyptians. They useta build themselves tombs when they died; jest like this. An'—so the book said—when thousands o' years later people came ta open 'em up, there was a curse—"

"Holy cow!" quavered the one who had spoken first. "I'm gonna get outa here."

"Shut yer bloody jaw!" snapped the second. "You quit yer post and the Boss'll blast ya down. *You've* seen 'im when he's sore."

"Yeah! But I'm still scared."

There was a little silence; then a jumble of voices, as if men were coming out of the tomb.

Then, like the snap of a whip, the Boss's accents, furious, raging.

"You blasted fools! Carry it carefully. I'll burn down the first man who lets go his end. Do you hear me? It's not alive; it's an effigy. Damn it; a statue! *What* a find!"

Kerry shrank against the tunnel wall, peered out stealthily.

The group had emerged into unobstructed vision. Four men were staggering under the weight of a tiny effigy. One of the space-suited figures gestured. "All right! Put it down a while and catch your breath. But ease it down."

"Aha!" thought Kerry. "So *you're* the Boss. Here goes!"

He raised his projectile gun. But as he did, the group swirled, and the Boss was hidden again in an indistinguishable mob. Kerry cursed; then grunted philosophically. Perhaps there'd be another chance.

There wasn't. Everyone out there was gesturing excitedly. It was impossible to tell which was which. And they had opened up again; so that a single shot would not catch more than one or two.

But there was no question that the men were on the verge of rebellion. Terror sounded in their voices.

"Look, Boss!" pleaded one. "We got enough swag out there in the open. Let's not fool around with th—this!"

"It sure looks alive," cried another. "I don't aim ta mix up with no—"

"Stop this infernal caterwauling!" gritted the Boss. "You've rested—more than enough. Pick it up again; or by the rings of Saturn—"

One of the men, as he stooped unwillingly, suddenly straightened up. His goggled helmet stared toward the base of the tower in which Kerry was ensconced, his rubberoid finger pointed directly toward the tunnel opening. As Kerry flattened himself against the inner wall, the man's voice was shrill with excitement.

"Look over there!" he shouted. "There's another tunnel; and *it's open*!"

All helmets turned in the direction of the pointing finger. The voice of the Boss rose triumphant.

"Open it is!" he cried. "When they abandoned this planet millions of years ago, this must have been the last structure they quit. And they left in a hurry; they didn't have time even to seal it up as they did the other ones. That means they left things behind. Come on, men; here's where we'll find real loot."

Kerry began to sweat. Now they must be discovered. At the best the five of them could kill off a few of the invaders. The others would scatter outside and take up sniping positions so that they dare not emerge. The pirates could then place their space cannon in a commanding position and blast a seal upon the entrance. They would then be trapped inside, without food or drink, to await inevitable death!

It would be better to go down fighting; and take as many of the pirates with them as they could. Flattened against the dark of the inner wall, he gestured frantically behind him. If only Jem was watching up the dark tunnel and was able to decipher his code gestures. The light was tricky.

Outside, the outlaws stood indecisively; and for a moment the hope sprang up in Kerry that they'd be too scared and superstitious to try another burial place. But finally, though with manifest reluctance, they began to drift toward the tunnel. Kerry swore under his breath. Even in their fear they instinctively came on in a sort of skirmish line, presenting no massed target.

By now Kerry's projectile gun was in his hand, ready to pump pellets as fast as his finger could press. The perspiration trickled down inside his space suit. Where were his own men? Hadn't Jem seen his signal?

On and on came the outlaws. There was a certain dragging to their gait. One of them had his ray gun in his hand; but the hand seemed to wobble and the gun described an erratic arc.

Still on and on. Crouching in the semi-darkness, Kerry lifted his gun. If only he knew which one was the Boss! If only he had time, without betraying his presence, to rip off his helmet and shout back to Jem. *Everything*, he thought in despair, had gone wrong!

The outlaws were by now a bare thirty paces away. And still no touch on his shoulder from behind, to show that his crew had seen and come up to support him. It was too late to run back to warn them; by then the outlaws would have swarmed into the tunnel. He must hold the entrance alone. Perhaps, once the shooting started, the inexcusably negligent Jem and his fellows would hurry up. By that time, of course, it would be too late.

Only twenty-five paces away. In another moment he must begin to fire. He sighted on the lead man, praying desperately that *he* was the Boss. His finger tensed to press down on the firing button.

What was that? He started violently. There had been a touch on his shoulder, a slight pressure. His knees wobbled a little. Thank God at least for that! Jem—good old Jem—had

seen his signal. His men were backing him up. Now there would be a fight of it and not a trapped entombment.

He dared not turn his head. Watching straight ahead, he nodded imperceptibly to show that he had felt the supporting touch. His gun, which had momentarily sagged, came up again.

The next instant it was pulled down violently from behind; and someone brushed past him. A cry of astonishment swelled in his throat, choked off abruptly. The pirates would hear. Was Jem crazy? What was going on?

The push had staggered him against the wall. He righted himself angrily. Then the veins swelled in his forehead until they seemed ready to burst. An inarticulate cry came from his lips. Someone, something, was moving past him and out of the tunnel into the open.

Now *he* must be mad! For the figure, rigid, hieratic, walking with a stiff, mechanical gait, was one of the effigies—magnified —enlarged! The cheeks were palely tinted, the eyes half-closed, the hair fell in shimmering folds to the delicate shoulders. The arms were rigid and extended as though the thing were walking in its sleep. A strange glow enveloped the slender form so that it seemed half-hidden in a glittering mist; an eerie iridescence made a halo round the shapely head.

Kerry's heart hammered. An effigy had come to life; but an effigy enlarged to almost twice the height of the one he had seen. As if—as if—this were some immortal goddess of the ancient race!

The figure walked slowly, steadily toward the oncoming pirates. They had stopped at the first emergence of the apparition. For a split moment they stood as rigid as the approaching figure; then a simultaneous cry of horror burst from a score of throats.

"They—they've come to life!"

"It's a ghost!"

"Oh, Lord, lemme outa here!"

Something tugged at Kerry's mind; something about that

eerie, marching figure. Then came whelming realization. Fear and horror mixed in explosive mixture; gun in hand, he jerked forward.

Strong arms caught him from behind, pulled him back. Hands tugged at his helmet clamps; forced them open. A well-remembered voice hissed in his ear. "Easy does it, Kerry! You'll spoil everything. She's doin' fine."

He struggled a moment; then subsided panting. Jem was right.

A long moment the tableau held in frozen immobility outside. Then it burst violently asunder. With his helmet off, Kerry could not hear the shrieks of the helmeted pirates. But they spun on their heels and fled; each man for himself, scrambling up the steep smooth slopes, clawing for footholds, falling, slipping, stumbling in wildest terror.

One man alone remained behind, his arms flailing and his helmeted head bobbing as if he were shouting fierce curses on the fugitives. With a sudden furious gesture he whirled on the approaching figure. His hand darted to his belt, came up with a ray gun.

Kerry shot first. The silent pellet sped from his weapon. The man jerked violently, the gun flew from his fingers, and he fell in a twisted heap.

"Okay, boys!" shouted Jem joyfully. "Let the others have it; but don't let 'em see you."

Ray guns and projectile guns flashed and clicked. Frantically climbing outlaws threw up their arms and came rolling and bouncing down the steep incline, to lie in sprawling immobility.

But the majority had already vanished over the rim of the crater, and were doubtless pounding over the tesselated surface for their distant rocket ship.

Kerry raced out into the open with a great cry. "Sally!"

The figure turned. The eyes were open and there was an impish light in them that penetrated the eerie glow.

Then he had her in his arms. Even until then he had had some doubts. But the feel of warm, yielding flesh penetrated even the rubberoid of his space suit. "Sally!" he cried again, almost unbelievingly. "It was crazy! Suppose they didn't scare! Suppose they had shot!"

She smiled her old impudent smile at him. "But they didn't, you see. Now if you will kindly remove your . . . er . . . fatherly embrace, I'll try and get rid of my war paint."

She was without her space suit; and the iridescence clung to her close-fitting dress. She took out a handkerchief; rubbed vigorously at her cheeks, forehead, hair, neck, and then her garments. Slowly the glow faded and paled. A faint aura remained, but once more she was a living, breathing and normal young lady—if the last designation could be used accurately in connection with such a decorative work of nature as Sally.

Kerry said first: "Jem, send a man up the slope to keep an eye out for the outlaws, just in case they get over their scare and return."

Then, to Sally: "How in heaven's name did you manage this eerie masquerade?"

"Young man," she said severely, "it is obvious you know little about women." She reached into the pocket of her dress, came out with a flat gold case.

"A make-up kit!" he gasped.

"Right the first time. Since I was determined literally not to be seen dead with my lips askew, I started to fix up my face while waiting for the outlaws to come charging in. The next thing I knew Jem was staring at me as if I were something from a Venusian swamp."

"That aint so!" interrupted that worthy with considerable embarrassment. "It was jest that Miss Sally's face was shining with a funny light; as if she were—"

"A *haunt*, to use your exact words, my dear Jem. But that gave me an idea. If I scared the daylights out of Jem, who *knew* who I was; what would it do if I rubbed the stuff all over

me and emerged suddenly on the outlaws. I must say," she added complacently, "my first and only appearance as a *haunt* was a tremendous success."

"It was all of that," agreed Kerry. "It saved our lives. That warpaint of yours is evidently allergic to this radioactive air; for which, many thanks."

The man peering over the rim of the crater suddenly shouted, and began to gesticulate madly. The distance was too great for them to make out what he was saying, but it was evident that he was laboring under intense excitement.

Kerry started violently. "They must be coming back. Come on!"

He took the long smooth slope on the run, with the others panting and struggling after him. As he swung over the top, the guard was already standing, boldly silhouetted against the level plain.

"Look, Mr. Dale!" he crowed. "They're getting the hell outa here; We beat 'em!"

Far off, flames were jetting from the pirate ship and a distant roaring came across the surface of the tiny world. Then, as they watched, the ship lifted, moved swiftly upward and disappeared into the iridescent fog overhead.

"A good riddance, say I," exulted Jem. "Now we kin really get at that stuff."

But Kerry was strangely quiet. The jubilation of the others passed over him like a wave, but did not penetrate.

Sally was the first to detect the strangeness. "What is wrong, Kerry?" she asked anxiously. "Isn't this good?"

"Good!" he echoed; then laughed harshly. "Good that we are stranded on a comet, without a ship, without even a pellet of food or drink upon us! As long as that pirate ship was here, we had a chance to capture it and get away. But now—" He gestured hopelessly.

The others looked at one another. They had not thought of that. Jem was the first to break the frozen silence.

"But the *Flash* 'll come back," he cried. "Sparks aint gonna desert us."

"He's on his way to Ganymede," Kerry said quietly. "He evidently could not fix the space cannon. I told him to go on myself. Even if he raises help by radio before he gets there, it will take over a week for it to come. Within a week, we'll be dead of thirst, if not of hunger."

The realization of it stunned them a moment. Then Sally rallied. "Perhaps," she said hopefully, "some of those dead pirates down there had more forethought than we had. Maybe *they* have some pellets on them."

Jem's face cleared. "In course they have!" he grinned. "Let's take a look."

But his grin was short-lived. They toiled down the slope again, and examined each dead body carefully. There was nothing. They came last to the outlaw whom Kerry had shot. He too had nothing but the usual impedimenta that any man might carry in his pockets.

"Our last hope gone," declared Kerry dully, as he rose from his fruitless search.

But Jem was staring at the twisted, rage-filled features of the man who had evidently been the Boss. "Jumping lizards of a Martian canal!" he gulped. "It's Pyotra!"

Kerry jumped, looked at the man more closely. He had evidently been handsome, imperious once. The ravages of long evil and a hell of emotions hadn't eliminated all traces. He had never seen Pyotra—he had been only a boy in school at the time—but the case had been a cause célèbre.

Pyotra had been a famous scientist in the North Eurasian Department of Earth. What the whole story was, very few knew—it had been a closely guarded secret of the Earth Council. But there were rumors that Pyotra had planned a coup—to seize the members of the Council and proclaim himself dictator of the Earth. The plot had been discovered, and the Council sent swift patrols to the frozen north to seize the plot-

ter. But Pyotra had vanished. Though he was legally declared an outlaw, it was generally believed that in despair he had committed suicide.

Kerry stared curiously at the dead body of the man who had been possessed of the demoniac urge for power. Then a thought struck him. "How do you know this is Pyotra, Jem?" he asked. "As I remember it, very few knew him personally. And no picture was ever published."

Jem gulped, hemmed, hawed and turned a fiery red. "I—I useta get around a bit," he stammered.

"Oh! Oh!" Kerry thought remorsefully, "I'll have to learn to keep my big mouth shut." Jem's past was a well-kept secret. No one knew his last name even. There were rumors about him, though; that his real name was on the police records of the farflung stations of the System; but no one ever inquired. Whatever he had been before, Jem was thoroughly okay now.

Aloud, Kerry said briskly. "There's only one thing to do. We'll have to hike over to that radiation-gusher at which they were anchored. Perhaps in their haste they left something."

At Sally's urgent plea they took with them the tiny effigy which the pirates had dropped. "If we ever *do* get off this place," she said with a catch in her voice, "I'd like to have it along. I'm sure it's a mummy case; that inside there's one of the little folk who inhabited this world eons ago."

It was remarkably heavy; but no one said her nay. They staggered under the load the five long miles to the eternal fount that loomed before them like a tumbling, rushing, dazzling geyser.

Halfway there, Kerry paused. They had all taken off their space suits for greater walking ease. "Put them on again," he warned. "And snap your helmets shut. So far we've found no evidence that the radiations are harmful. But they may be in large doses."

Once more accoutered, they wearily made the final distance.

Already they were thirsty from their long exertions; but no one mentioned it. What was the sense of complaining when nothing could be done about it?

The gusher was a magnificent sight. Pure energy boiled up from a seething hole, flowed like fiery liquid into the iridescent fog. Kerry approached it cautiously. He removed his tiny radiation counter from its leaden case. The needle swung violently to the farther end—and broke!

"Jumping Jupiter!" he exclaimed. "This counter was geared to take the heaviest man-made radiation in the System—stuff that would burn any form of life to a crisp."

"All I feel," said Sally, "is a pleasant tingling."

One of the crew said anxiously: "Maybe its effects will show up later, Mr. Dale."

Kerry shook his head. "It's possible; but we must remember that Pyotra and his gang have been working here for many hours; and evidently they were unharmed."

They searched the terrain. They found scattered mining equipment which the panic-stricken crew had left behind. They found also two dazzling white blocks; cubes not more than six inches square.

"Hell!" said Jem disgustedly. "Is that all those babies could mine in the time they was here?"

Kerry approached them gingerly. Cautiously, with gloved hands, he tried to pick one up. A fairly heavy electrical shock ran through his body; though his suit was insulated. He tried again. He couldn't lift it. He called Jem over; then the two members of the crew. They tugged and strained; but they couldn't budge the tiny block.

Kerry straightened, said in awe: "This stuff is compressed energy of the order of a dwarf star. This little cube weighs at least a ton. No wonder Pyotra, for all his scientific knowledge and equipment, was able only to get out these two so far."

He tried to brush his hand across his face, forgetting that the

helmet was on. "But it won't matter to us," he said wearily. "Has any one found any drink pellets yet."

"Not a one!" they chorused.

Kerry stared up at the overlay of fog, tried to pierce its colorful depths. If only he hadn't given such definite orders to the *Flash* to keep going!

Already his tongue was beginning to swell, and his mouth felt as though it were stuffed with spun fiber. He stared at the others. Jem's lips were working ominously. He caught Kerry's gaze and stopped their movement. Sally met his eyes with a wan attempt at a smile. Her face showed pale through the glassite visor.

"Another few hours of this—an Earth day at the most—" thought Kerry with a sinking sensation, "and we'll be dead in torments. Why, for God's sake, did Sally have to be in this?"

Doggedly he searched among the abandoned equipment.

"It's no use, Kerry." Sally's voice was thick, unlike its usual bell-like quality. "We've searched thoroughly. There isn't a pellet around."

Kerry found what he was looking for. A thin-edged cutting blaster. With slow, painful movements he turned on the power, etched in the hard metallic surface of the planet the symbols and indicia of title—that he, Kerry Dale, citizen of Earth, laid claim to the entire Comet X as his personal possession.

He straightened up to meet their joint stupefied gaze. He managed a grin, but his tongue was so swollen he could barely understand what he himself was saying. "At least," he mumbled, "our legal heirs will have the avails."

Jem said thickly, uncertainly. "Nary a chance. The Commission'll take all. Remember *you* won't be there to fight 'em."

But Sally's eyes glowed. She managed to say: "Kerry, I—I love your spirit. I—love *you*!"

Then she swayed and would have fallen had Kerry not caught at her, and held her limp body.

They all sat down; they found it difficult to stand any more. Seated, they stared at one another. The thirst began to burn and rage. The strange little planet from another universe was taking its revenge on these rash intruders. The boiling lake, the curving metal surface, the blanketing glow overhead, mocked them and began to swim and dazzle in their disordered vision.

The end was not far off!

CHAPTER 14

CLEM BORDEN, with Simeon Kenton to spur him on, drove his racing *Deimos* in furious twists and turns all over space the hell and gone to Ganymede. Every time he paused and protested: "It's no go, Mr. Kenton. There's not a sign of them anywhere!" old Simeon exploded afresh. "Dad blast it, Clem," he yelled. "Keep going till I tell you to stop; and then keep going some more!"

But there came a time when even Simeon, reeling with fatigue, and spelling Borden at the controls, was compelled to confess that they couldn't search much farther. That was when the fuel gave signs of running out.

"Okay, Clem," he said finally. "Turn 'er in to Ganymede."

"And give it up?" asked the racer hopefully.

"No, dingburn ye! We're taking on fuel, an' going on to the comet."

Borden stared as if he hadn't heard right. "What!" he exclaimed. "That's out beyond Jupiter. No one's ever been there yet."

"Then we'll be the first. Besides," old Simeon added bitterly: "That rubble-dyed impscallion Dale is goin' there—and my daughter."

"I won't go," declared Borden firmly.

"Ha!" shouted Kenton. "But you blamed well will. Look 't your contract. You go wherever I want ye to go. And if you don't, I'll sue you for your shirt. It's all in the contract—forfeiture, quintuple liquidated damages and—and—everything. My Legal Department does things right, I'll have you know."

He didn't see fit to add that it was this same "impscallion" Kerry Dale who had thoughtfully inserted those clauses into the standard contract of hire during his short sojourn in the Legal Department of Kenton Space Enterprises, Unlimited.

Borden gave it up. They landed in Ganymede, where the racer morosely superintended the refilling of the tanks. Old Simeon hastened in the meantime toward the local office of the Space Patrol, located on the edge of the landing field.

As he rushed toward the office, his thin white hair flapping with the speed of his passage, hastily gathered reporters rushed after him.

"Mr. Kenton!" they implored. "Have you found out anything?"

"Can you give us a story?"

"No use trying the Patrol. They haven't a thing."

"Shut up, boys!" he snapped back at them as they almost clung to his coattails. "There aint no story and there isn't going to be one."

"Oh, no?" cried one of the newshounds with sudden jubilation. "Look who's coming out of the Communications Building! Jericho Foote himself, as large as life, if not as natural."

It *was* Foote, looking as pleased as his vulpine features would permit him to look. He had just received a code message from Pyotra through a most complicated and circuitous relay. From the pirate ship to their hideout in the Asteroid Belt, to an automatic sending station hidden inside a hollowed-out bit of flotsam in space, to Ganymede. It took several days for the message to pass through the circuit, but it effectually guarded against any tracing of it to its original source. Pyotra merely

reported that he had landed at his destination, and that the prospects of doing good business were terrific. By that Foote knew that the outlaws had discovered something immensely valuable. No wonder he was pleased!

But his pleasure vanished when he saw old Simeon Kenton come striding purposefully across the field toward him, followed by a rout of reporters who seemed literally to be licking their chops in anticipation.

Foote's hand went instinctively to the scar on his face—the memento of his last meeting with that old maniac, Simeon Kenton. And now, as he knew only too well, he had given Kenton even more provocation than at that time.

His beady eyes darted frantically around for escape, for help. But the field was bare, except for the oncoming Kenton and the newshounds. And, he remembered bitterly, they hadn't interfered the other time until he was half dead. Why wasn't there an officer of the law around? What the hell did he pay taxes for—when he couldn't help himself—if he got no protection?

Then his questing gaze caught sight of the Space Patrol station. Ah! With a long sigh of relief he turned and made for it with that peculiar gait of a man who doesn't wish to appear as though he were running away, but actually is. Even Kenton, crazy as he was, wouldn't dare attack him in the presence of the Patrol.

"Good day, sir," he commenced hurriedly to the uniformed Commander at the desk, when old Simeon came barging in almost at his heels. The next instant the place was crowded with eager reporters.

Old Kenton made straight for Foote, his fist raised to strike. "You rubble-dyed, blast-doodled, slime-guttered scoundrel!" he yelled. "I'll teach ye to wrap your filthy tongue around the name o' my daughter!"

Foote shrank in terror against the farther wall. "Stop him, some one!" he screamed. "The man is mad!"

The Commander, who had come startled to his feet at this sudden invasion of his peaceful precincts, signaled to a Space Patrolman at another desk. The Patrolman jumped up, interposed his brawny form between attacker and his projected victim.

"Now, now, Mr. Kenton," he said soothingly. "You know you can't do that."

Foote took courage. His dark face twisted eagerly. "You all saw that—that maniac assault me. I want him arrested. I'm pressing charges."

Dancing with rage, old Simeon tried to dart around the intervening officer. "I aint had a chance to bash you yet. Lemme at him, so he'll have a real good case."

But at every rush, the Patrolman was deftly there in front of him, warding him off. Then the Commander came out to take a hand. "I'm surprised at your actions, Mr. Kenton. A man of your standing—"

"I want him arrested," persisted Foote shrilly. "He almost killed me on Planets."

"I'm sorry I didn't!" Simeon shouted.

"You hear that? I demand he be placed in jail."

The Commander looked uneasy. Secretly he sympathized with Kenton. The provocation had been ample. And Kenton was also one of the most powerful men in the system. But the law was the law. There had been at least an attempted assault, and in the presence of witnesses.

With a sigh he asked: "You insist, Mr. Foote?"

"Of course I insist," cried that worthy.

With an even greater sigh, the Commander motioned to the Patrolman. "All right; take Mr. Kenton inside. And I set temporary bail at five hundred Earth dollars."

"Why, that's a ridiculous sum!" screamed Foote. "You might just as well let him go free now."

The Commander turned on him. "Sir," he said sternly, "You've made a legal request for an arrest, and I've legally

arrested the accused. But temporary bail is wholly in my discretion. Five hundred dollars."

Kenton grinned, took out a wad of bills. He peeled off the top one. "Here it is!" he said. "I'll make it ten thousand if you'll let me take just one swing at that scum."

"You hear him?" shrilled Foote.

The Commander looked pained, started to speak, when the buzzer sounded. "Hmm! We'll settle this in a moment. Excuse me."

He went to his desk, switched on his screen. It was a confidential screen. No one but he could see who was on it; and neither voice traveled beyond circumscribed limits. All that the others could observe was the expression on the Commander's countenance as he listened and replied into the screen.

A silence fell on the crowded room. The disappointed reporters, who had hoped that Old Fireball would take at least one good poke at Foote, perked up. The Commander's face was at first startled, then intent. He spoke rapidly at intervals, then listened again with the deepest attention. The minutes passed. The atmosphere grew oppressive. Obviously a message of the greatest importance was coming through. The newshawks whispered to one another, poised for a deluge of questions as soon as the conversation had ended. This was their lucky day. First, the incident between Old Fireball and Foote; and now—this still unknown message.

At long last the Commander was finished. He switched off his set, came from behind his desk. His face was strangely set. The reporters crowded around. "Tell us what just came through," they implored. "Come on, be a good fellow."

He disregarded their clamor. He stared peculiarly at old Simeon. He cleared his throat; and the newsmen hushed.

"That message," he said gently, "was from one of our Patrol ships. They got a call from the *Flash*."

"The *Flash*!" It seemed as if every throat in the room—with

the exception of Foote's—echoed the name. The reporters grabbed for their tablets, began to scribble furiously.

Kenton took a step forward. "My daughter!" he said hoarsely. "Is she all right?"

The Commander shifted his gaze; clearcd his throat again. "The message," he said, "came from the radio operator of the *Flash*. Miss Kenton and . . . er . . . Mr. Dale are on Comet X."

There was a sensation. Pencils raced. Wow! What a story! Elopers honeymooning on mysterious Comet X!

Foote's features twisted. There was alarm in his eyes. He opened his mouth; clamped it shut with a strangulating effort.

Old Simeon gulped, flushed. For the first time in his life he was at a loss. "Th—then where's the *Flash*?" he stammered.

"Somewhere betwcen Comet X and Jupiter. The Patrol ship lost contact after Sparks told his story. It seems . . . uh . . . that the radio operator deliberately broke off. A legal offense, I might say; one which might lead to the revocation of his license."

"The ripfaddled blazes with his license!" yelled Simeon. "What story did he tell?"

"A very strange one." The Commander was definitely not looking at anyone in the crowded room. "The *Flash* landed on the comet, in spite of the Commision's prohibition—another serious penal offcnse, I might add. But they . . . ah . . . found another ship ahead of them. A band of outlaws we've been hunting high and low through space these past few years. Miss Kenton, Mr. Dale and three members of their crew landed some distance away to investigate. While they were gone, the outlaws attacked the *Flash*. To avoid destruction, Sparks took off."

"And left the others behind?" cried Simeon incredulously. Then a dreadful thought came to him. "Then—then—," he choked, "the pirates have my daughter!"

No one, in the tension of the room, heard Footc's quick

sigh of relief, or saw the twisted grin that spread over his countenance.

"As far as Sparks knew," admitted the Commander. He paused a moment; then continued. "But that isn't the end of the story. The Patrol ship, when Sparks broke off abruptly, started for Comet X. On the way they ran into a suspicious craft hurtling in from outer space. They ordered it to stop for inspection. The ship swerved and fired. The Patrol replied and smashed its starboard jet. When they boarded it, they found the outlaws; or rather, what was left of them."

Foote began to slide stealthily along the wall toward the outer entrance. The Commander made a surreptitious signal. The Patrolman walked nonchalantly over to the door, leaned solidly against it, blocking all egress.

"But my daughter!" exclaimed Simeon with feverish impatience.

"That's the most curious part of the whole story. The outlaws we caught were almost inarticulate with fright. They hadn't seen her, or Dale. They admitted attacking the *Flash;* but swear there was no one besides themselves on the comet. Except—" The Commander paused, looked puzzled. "They kept babbling of some terrific experience; of a world beyond time, of the ghosts of a people dead for millions of years. They sounded insane; but there was no question they had seen something—or thought they saw something. They left their leader and some of their fellows behind, and took off in wild haste."

Foote was saying ingratiatingly to the Patrolman: "Excuse me. I want to go out."

"And," the Commander's voice rose inexorably. "They confessed everything they knew."

"I must get out," gasped Foote frantically. "A message I must send—something urgent."

"Hold that man!" thundered the Commander suddenly. "In the name of the Interplanetary Commission, Jericho Foote, you are under arrest. You are charged with conspiracy to sub-

vert the ends of justice, piracy on the spaceways, grand larceny, assault and battery with deadly weapons and—murder."

Foote, struggling in the grip of the burly Patrolman, screamed: "It aint true. It's all a lie. It's a frameup."

"That remains for a court of justice to decide," the Commander said contemptuously. "Lock him up and—," he added grimly, "there'll be no bail."

The newsmen almost knocked over the Patrolman and his squirming captive in their wild rush to get out and over to the Communications office. This would set the whole System on its collective ear. There had never been a story like this since—since— Only one man was able to finish the analogy properly; and that was only after he had transmitted his story.

The brilliant thought came to him with the third glass of *pulla* he was imbibing in a neighboring saloon. He shook the empty container at his admiring fellows, swayed a trifle and said somewhat thickly, but with the deepest solemnity: "Yesshir-ree, boys! Thish is th-the greatest story shince—shince—*Hector was a pup*!"

Back in the now deserted office of the Space Patrol, the Commander said sympathetically to old Simeon: "They *must* be all right, Mr. Kenton." But there was no conviction in his voice. "I've already ordered a fast Patrol to go out."

Simeon had appeared old and shrunken. Now he started, and the old fire snapped back into him. "Drat your Patrol ships!" he yelled. "I've got the *Deimos* here. It'll get me there in half the time of one of your space-scows."

"The *Deimos?* Very well, Mr. Kenton, I'll commandeer it."

Kenton whirled. "You'll do nothing of the sort," he snapped. "If you think you're goin' to keep me from going—Har-rumph! But you kin come as my guest," he ended abruptly.

"All right." The Commander didn't want to tangle too hard with Old Fireball. And besides—he himself was a father.

CHAPTER 15

KERRY DALE lifted himself with an effort. Sally was lying down, eyes closed, breathing heavily. Jem and the two crewmen were panting. They had their helmets off. It was easier that way; and, as Kerry had remarked quietly, it didn't matter much now whether the radiations were cumulatively deadly or not.

For the hundredth time they stared up at the maddeningly beautiful spectrum of colors that made up the enveloping cloud envelope. For the hundredth time they saw nothing.

"He won't come back!" groaned Jem hopelessly. "He's headin' straight fer Ganymede."

"If'n only we hadda radio set ta contact Sparks," whimpered one of the crewmen.

"Well, we aint, Bob," Jem reproved him. "An' there aint no use ta keep on harping about it."

Kerry jerked erect. "By God!" he cried. "Bob, you've given me an idea."

They looked at him tiredly. "What idea?" asked Jem.

"How to contact Sparks."

"Huh!" grunted Jem. "The thirst's getting you."

But Kerry was already on his feet, rummaging among the equipment which the pirates had abandoned. He came back triumphantly with some lengths of wire. His voice was stronger; his eyes glowed.

"Look!" he said. "Each of us has a communication unit in our helmets, haven't we?"

"Yeah!" growled Jem. "With a sending radius of twenty miles."

"I'm going to step it up."

"How?"

Kerry pointed to the glowing blocks of energy. "There's our power. Use these wires to hook the block into the circuit."

Jem shook his head sceptically. "And blow the whole works t' smithereens."

"Maybe so; and then again maybe not. We can't lose anything by trying. After all, our power pack emits sub-electron energy. It's of the same order, though on an almost infinitely reduced scale."

Kerry swiftly inserted the ends of two of the wires into his own head set, placed the other ends cautiously on top of the cube of energy.

The wires quivered; the set made sputtering noises; then it exploded.

The men had risen up in their eagerness. Now they subsided with a collective groan.

But Kerry only said: "It lasted for ten seconds or so. Let's try another set."

One after the other, the sets of the four men quivered, made strange noises; and then, after varying intervals, puffed out.

"That's that!" said Jem with gloomy finality.

"Oh no it isn't," retorted Kerry. "There's still Sally's set."

"Our last one!" protested Jem.

"What good is it otherwise?" asked Kerry with irrefutable logic. He shook the sleeping girl gently. "Sally!"

She woke with a start. "We'll need your helmet, dear," said Kerry.

Without a word she took it off, handed it to him.

The men watched lackadaisically as he tried again. Once more the wires started their little dance; once again the set throbbed and sputtered. But it didn't explode!

A minute passed; then another. Gradually the sputter gave way to a steady hum.

"Eureka!" grinned Kerry, "as some ancient chap by the name of Archimedes was once supposed to have remarked. Now let's see if it's got sufficient radius."

As the others crowded eagerly around, their clogging thirst momentarily forgotten, Kerry spoke into the communicator disk. "Kerry Dale, calling the *Flash*. Kerry Dale, calling the *Flash*." Over and over again, monotonously.

The minutes fled. His voice grew hoarse and thick. No answer.

The light died in their eyes. "Aint enough radius," groaned Jem.

"Or maybe," added Bob gloomily, "them pirates caught up wi' Sparks."

But Kerry kept up doggedly until his voice gave out. "You try it now, Jem!" he husked.

Jem obeyed without any enthusiasm. A half hour. Forty-five minutes. Then *his* voice cracked.

Sally took the disk. On and on—until—

Faint but clear came an incredulous voice through the receptor. The voice of Sparks!

"Miss Kenton! For God's sake, is it really you?"

She started to answer—and broke. Kerry grabbed the receptor. "Sparks! This is Kerry Dale. What's your position?"

"Glory be! I thought you were all dead. I'm two hours out."

"Two hours!" Kerry jumped. "But it's ten hours since you started."

"I've turned back. I won't be able to come too close; the space cannon's still jammed. And those pirates—"

"They've gone, Sparks. Come down at the lake of energy. We're there."

"They're gone? Gee! Then I'm sorry I raised a Patrol ship with a call for help. They said they'd start for the comet right away."

"That's bad!" commented Kerry. Now that help seemed miraculously near he didn't want any Patrol ship on Comet X. "How far away were they?"

"About a million miles 'tother side of Jupiter."

"Which we're aproaching at an accelerating clip," thought Kerry. He did some rapid calculations in his head. "It'll take them at least twelve to fourteen hours," he said aloud. "Okay, Sparks, put on maximum speed. We—we're a little thirsty."

"I'm pushing her for all she's got!" cried Sparks jubilantly.

The five castaways did a little solemn dance of joy. "Kerry Dale!" cried Sally, her eyes shining. "You've saved all our lives!"

He grinned at her. "I wouldn't have had the chance if you hadn't pulled that trick on the pirates a while back. But let's get to work."

"Work?" Jem looked blank.

Kerry's voice vibrated as though some of the streaming energy had been absorbed into his system. "I want at least another block of that stuff mined before the Space Patrol gets here. They're likely to arrest us for breaking the Commission order."

"Aha!" ejaculated Jem. "So ye *didn't* have a legal doodad, Kerry." He shook his head mournfully, as though all his illusions were shattered. "How much time d'ye think they'll give us?"

"I *have* a 'doodad,' Jem; and I promise you you won't land in jail. But they'll take us to Ganymede before it can be

straightened out. By that time Comet X will be on its merry way out of our universe again."

"And no one will have any benefit," exclaimed Sally.

"Right! So let's take out as much as we can." Kerry carefully examined the edges of the boiling pool. "Ah! Here's where Pyotra was mining. The energy coagulated into a thick crust. Jem, you and your men assemble one of the blast cutters; bring it over here. Quick! We have little enough time!"

It was hard, difficult labor; made still harder by the thirst that clogged their throats and swelled their tongues. But they worked on doggedly, fiercely. Even Sally gave what hand she could.

The blaster was geared to sheer through the heaviest and most resistant metals as though they were yielding cheese. But this stuff was of a hardness and density never before found in the System. They sweated and gritted, and the blaster poured its cutting plane of energy in a steady roar. Yet by the end of two hours they had only penetrated a bare three inches.

They were groggy now. They had to wear their helmets in order to use the glassite windows with their polarized filters. Otherwise the glare would have blinded them. But the communication sets were smashed—except for Sally's—and they had to work in an eerie silence.

Bob finally staggered away, ripped off his helmet, and sank to the ground. "Sorry, Mr. Dale," he croaked. "I—I can't take it any more."

Kerry took off his own helmet, said remorsefully: "All right. We'll have to wait until Sparks comes down. He's about due now."

He had barely spoken when a roaring was heard overhead, and the ungainly bulk of the *Flash* pierced the colorful haze with front rockets blasting to check the ship's flight.

To the castaways, half dead with thirst and exhaustion, the System held no more beautiful sight than the squat, serviceable salvage ship, with its nobby appendage of Sally's *Iris*. They set

up a feeble cheer as the ship settled with a shuddering bump on the flat metallic surface of the strange little planet; and they staggered toward it as the port slid open.

But Bill and Alf were already running toward them, with containers full of drink pellets and concentrated tablets of food. Not a word was passed until they had greedily swallowed several of the pellets. As the concentrated balls melted in their mouths and released their bulk of life-giving fluid, a simultaneous sigh of satisfaction rose into the glowing air. Then the tablets followed, as the two men watched with sympathetic eyes.

Kerry took a deep breath. He felt refreshed, restored. Everything was all right now. The nightmare was passed. Sparks came out; a broad grin on his withered face. It was the first time anyone had ever seen his dour countenance relaxed in a smile. They shook hands all around, solemnly, as people released from the shadow of death.

Then Kerry got down to business again. "Tell me exactly what passed between you and the Patrol," he asked.

The grin wiped from Spark's face. He relapsed into his wonted mournful expression. "I didn't tell 'em much," he said gloomily. "Only that you were stranded here, and trying to fight off a gang of outlaws. They said they'd send help. Then they fired more questions at me, but I shut off communication, turned tail and came scooting right back. Thought we'd have the cannon fixed by that time; but the damned thing is still jammed."

Kerry clapped him cordially on the shoulder. "You did swell, Sparks," he approved. "I won't forget."

But the man refused to be comforted. "They'll take my license away," he prognosticated mournfully. "I've done everything in the book a Class A operator hadn't oughta."

"We'll fix everything up all right," promised Kerry. "That Patrol will be here in about ten hours. I want to get away before they come. I have some . . . um . . . business to

attend to in Ganymede; and I don't want to go there under arrest. That means we'll have to work fast. Alf, Bill—you're still fresh. We've started to get out another block of the stuff. It's slow, tedious work, but I want you to carry on. There are the blasters. Jem, swing out the derrick tractors from the *Flash* and load those two cubes in the hull. Encase them in heavy lead plates, to make sure that the radiation doesn't knock our instruments haywire. Bob and Migs (this was the other member of the crew) will help you. Sparks, get back to your screens and watch out for the Patrol. In the meantime, I'll see what's wrong with the cannon. Now get going."

A pert voice piped up: "And what do *I* do, Mister Dale?"

He paused in mid-stride. Then he grinned at the girl. Yes, there *was* something more beautiful than the *Flash*. "Sally, you're going to bed. You've done enough."

"I'll do nothing of the sort!" she stormed. "I'm not made of egg shells. I'm staying—"

But he had swept her up into his arms, was carrying her into the port. He dumped her down on a cot, stood over her. "Now you stay there, young lady," he snapped, "until I give you orders to get up." He smiled. "No, Sally, you're not made of egg shells. To quote an ancient rhyme—you're made of sugar and spice, and all things that 're nice."

Then he was gone. Sally looked after him a moment; then, with a blissful sigh fell back on the cushion. In seconds she was fast asleep.

The men worked hard and furiously. The two precious cubes were lifted into the ship; so was the effigy which Sally had insisted on taking. Some hours later a third cube finally yielded unwillingly to the incessant blast, and was similarly deposited.

Jem asked anxiously: "D'ye think we'll have time to try for still another, Kerry?"

Dale looked at his chronograph and shook his head. "If my calculations were correct, the Patrol is due to show up in about

two or three hours. No; we'll have to get off. Once I've settled our claim of title on Ganymede—and I may have to take the matter back to Earth—we'll try again. By that time, Comet X will have swung around the sun, and be scooting out to space again. I hope," he added, "the Commission will see the light quickly. This stuff is too vital—"

Sparks appeared suddenly at the *Flash's* port. "There's a ship coming in fast," he cried. "I picked up blasting rockets on my detector."

Kerry jumped. "It's too early for the Patrol," he exclaimed. "It's some one else—perhaps the pirates, recovered from their fright. Everyone into the *Flash;* prepare for a fast take-off."

But it was too late. Even as they rushed for the ship, a craft came whooshing down in a thunder of rockets, leveled off and glided to a halt.

Kerry's gun came out; so did Jem's. Then Kerry cried: "That isn't the pirate ship. Hold it, Jem!"

Sally's clear voice came to them from the *Flash*. "It's a racer! Good heavens, it's the *Deimos*—Clem Borden's champion!"

Two men came running out of the sleek little ship even before it had stopped rolling.

One of them—short, thin, with a halo of flying white hair—shouted: "Sally!"

"Dad!"

They met halfway in a great clinch. "Thank God! Thank God!" said old Simeon over and over again.

The other man, in full uniform of a regional Patrol Commander, walked more sedately over to Kerry. He disregarded the weapon in the latter's hand.

"Kerry Dale?"

Kerry pushed his weapon back into the belt. He smiled slightly. "The same," he said. "And you're Commander Matthews of the Space Patrol."

"Quite right, young man. You are under arrest."

"Arrest?" Kerry's eyebrows lifted. "On what charges?"

"First, kidnapping; the kidnapping of Miss Kenton."

Old Simeon came hurtling over. His eyes blazed, his hair flared, he danced around the young man in a rage. "That's right, dingburn ye for a dimscullion, Dale. I expected almost anything else of ye, but not this. You forced my daughter along on this blamefoozled, scarumharum trip o' yours!"

But Sally was right behind him, her eyes blazing with equal rage. "That's the most ridiculous thing I've heard even *you* say, dad. Kerry kidnap me? Why, I chased *him*—and got him, too," she ended triumphantly.

"Hmm!" said the Commander somewhat thoughtfully. "That *does* seem to dispose of the kidnapping charge, Mr. Kenton, doesn't it?"

"Har-rumph!" Old Simeon stared keenly at his daughter, stroked his chin whiskers. "Well—that is—my own flesh an' blood calling me a liar—har-rumph—" Then he swung and shouted joyously at Kerry: "But we got ye on the other charge, aint we, Matthews?"

"Yes of course." The Commander cleared his throat. "You are charged, Mr. Dale," he said formally, "with wilfully disobeying the order of the Interplanetary Commission which forbade all landing at, on or in the planetary body known temporarily as Comet X, except in such manner and under such conditions therein made and provided. You will therefore come with me quietly to Ganymede."

Old Kenton did a little jig. "That 'll teach ye, you young snapper-dipper," he crowed, "to tangle with Simeon Kenton. I told ye I'd get the better of ye, if it took to singdom rum—I mean kingdom come. And let me tell you something else, Kerry Dale. The Commission sent me authority to act as their agent in taking over this here comet—with a percentage of the take, of course. *Now* will ye admit I put one over on ye?"

The crew of the *Flash* crowded round, looking glum. Jem was positively sick. Sally flared at her respected progenitor:

"Dad, I'm ashamed of you. You wouldn't put Kerry in jail, would you?"

"Well, har-rumph, not if he admits he's licked."

They all stared then at Kerry.

That young man seemed completely calm. "I'm sorry to have to disabuse your revered father, Sally," he addressed himself solely to the girl. "In fact, as he so elegantly put it, *he's* the one who's been licked again." He shook his head sadly. "If he persists in his illusion, I'll have to order him off my property."

Old Simeon choked, glared. "Order *me* off!" he screamed. "Matthews, do your duty!"

The Commander said sternly: "You're making it hard for yourself, Dale. You're adding a charge of resisting arrest to your other offenses."

Kerry grinned. "There is no resistance, where there is no authority to arrest. I can quote you—"

"You don't have to," retorted the Commander impatiently. "I know all that. But I possess ample authority, by virtue of—"

"The Interplanetary Commission? They have no jurisdiction on Comet X."

"Eh, what's that?"

"By this time, Peter Wilson of the Pleasure Dome Observatory must have fully calculated the orbit of the body known as Comet X."

"Yes, he has."

"And found, as I did, that its orbit is a true parabola. Therefore, Comet X is *not* a member of the Solar System. Let me quote from the Interplanetary Charter, Article One, Section Two. 'The jurisdiction of the aforesaid Commission shall extend to all members of the Solar System and its component bodies, planets, moons, satellites, asteroids, meteors, comets, flotsam and jetsam; and the space surrounding them.' But Comet X is *not* a member or body of the Solar System. It came from another System, or perhaps another Universe."

"I knowed it! I knowed it!" chortled Jem. "Leave it ta Kerry Dale ta think up some doodad!"

The Commander was flabbergasted, and showed it. Then he rallied and said triumphantly. "Ah, Mr. Dale. You forgot one little item which you quoted. The Commission has jurisdiction of *the space surrounding*. And Comet X is now in that space."

Kerry smiled. "Of the space, yes," he admitted; "but not of the body. Let me put it this way. Comet X is a stranger to this System, temporarily passing through. It carries its own law with it, except insofar as it interferes with the rights or possessions of the citizens of the state through which it passes. So far, you must admit, Comet X has not done so."

"But—"

"Let me continue. Earth lawyers from the beginning of Earth law—which is the fundamental basis for Planetary Law—have recognized the status of such alien objects as Comet X; objects that *never* legally belonged to a citizen of the state or the state itself. The Roman legists called them *res nullius*—things which have not or which never had a legal owner. Read the great Pandects of Justinian for the pertinent clauses. They unanimously agreed that such *res nullius* belonged to its first possessor. And *I'm* that first possessor. If you will take the trouble to glance at the indicia of possession which I have engraved on the surface over there, you will note that I have taken this as my property with all due formality."

The Commander said doubtfully: "I know nothing of your Roman law. That was over two thousand years ago. They must have changed it since."

"Not at all. In fact, during the sixteenth century, Pope Julius II, in the famous Bull *Inter ceterae* tried to do just that. He sought to divide all the territories still undiscovered in what was then called the New World of America between Spain and Portugal. Immediately every legal writer of fame rose in sharp protest. I refer you to the writings of Grotius,

Puffendorf and Vattel. England also denied that the Pope had any jurisdiction. In the end the Pope's successors backed down; so did Spain and Portugal. The old Roman rule continued in effect."

Jem called out in high glee. "I don't understand a word you're saying, Kerry; but give it to 'em!"

Matthews was frankly beyond his depth. "I'm afraid I'll have to let the lawyers of the Commission decide this . . . er . . . matter."

Old Simeon was beside himself. "And in the meantime," he yelled, "young Dale will 've taken everything out of value here; and the comet 'll be the hell an' gone out of the System. Get him off it while your dingswizzled lawyers 're arguing."

The Commander turned to Kerry. "Will you come with me voluntarily to Ganymede, Mr. Dale?"

"No. You'd have to use force. And force," Kerry added significantly, "might lead to—shall I say—difficulties?"

Matthews shook his head. "I won't attempt force; not until my authority is cleared. Come on, Mr. Kenton. We'd better be going."

"Will you come with us, Sally?" old Simeon asked his daughter grumpily.

She smiled affectionately at him. "How can I, dad? I'm a partner—a minor partner, that is, along with Jem and the crew—in Kerry's find. You wouldn't want me to give up my claim, would you?"

"That settles it!" shouted Kenton. "My own blood an' flesh turns against me."

"You're welcome to stay, too, Mr. Kenton," said Kerry courteously. "I might even give *you* some small . . . uh . . . share, if you'll help us dig this stuff. I might tell you, for your private information, it's pure energy."

"Soncarn your impudence!" the old man shouted. He stalked angrily toward the *Deimos*. "Come on, Matthews! I'll fight him through every court. I'll—"

He was almost to the port, where Clem Borden was amusedly watching the scene. Then he swung suddenly back. "By the great horn spoon of Pluto, I'll stay if only to keep an eye on ye until Matthews gets an opinion from the Commission. How much of a share will you give me, young man?"

Kerry kept his face straight. "One-twentieth of everything we take out from now on."

"Har-rumph! That's little enough."

"It's as much as the others are getting; and they've been with me right from the beginning."

"Ha! Hum! It's a deal. But remember," Kenton yelled suddenly, "if you get licked in the courts, the deal's off."

"I'll remember."

"I'm glad to see," said Sally approvingly, "that your business instinct hasn't deserted you, dad."

"That's right," chuckled her esteemed progenitor. "Between us we'll have a tenth, eh, Sally?"

"Why, dad," she exclaimed reproachfully. "I'll have plenty of uses for *my* share."

Simeon appealed to the heavens for support. "To think that I raised a Venusian viper in my bosom!"

The Commander was saying to Kerry: "You know, we caught the pirate craft. And they 've implicated Jericho Foote. We've got him, too."

"It's about time the System was rid of that scum," Kerry assented heartily.

The Commander frowned. "One thing, though. We did not get the leader of the gang. They called him the Boss."

Kerry smiled. "I almost forgot. You'll find him, Commander, with a few of his men, lying dead in a crater five miles from here. His name, by the way, was Pyotra."

Matthews started violently. "Are you sure?" he exclaimed. "We've been searching for that fellow for years now. He's listed as the Number One Enemy of the System."

"Quite sure."

"I'll pick them up." Matthews swung on board, leaned out again. "Oh, Dale! If the legal lights back you up, I'll recommend that you get all the help you need to mine that stuff before it gets out of the System."

"Thanks! I intended in any event to donate most of it for public use. It's energy pure and inexhaustible."

Unfortunately, as an ancient poet once put it: "The best laid plans of mice and men gang oft agley."

No one had ever seen a live mouse for several hundred years; but the dictum still held good for men.

CHAPTER 16

THREE CUBES of energy were already on board ship. They were sweating and toiling halfway through a fourth, when two messages came winging through space to the *Flash*. The first was most heartening.

"Have placed matter of jurisdiction covering Comet X before Interplanetary Commission," radioed Mathews. "Their lawyers agree with your statement of the law. Work ships and crews standing by at Ganymede, Planets, Mars, Earth and Venus to assist you in mining energy. The Commission declared vote of thanks for your offer of public donation."

Old Simeon pricked up his ears. "Eh, you aint gone and given *my* share to the Commission, Dale?"

"I offered only what was mine to offer, Mr. Kenton," said Kerry with the utmost gravity. "I've reserved fourteen-twentieths for myself; out of that I intend to give to the public ten parts, and keep four for myself."

"Hah! There you see, Sally," cried her father. "I told you this young fellow was no business man."

"Hush your tongue!" retorted his daughter affectionately. "If you don't stop maligning yourself, I'll tell everyone what you've been handing out anonymously."

He glared at her. "Don't you dare—" he commenced.

Then the second message came through.

"Peter Wilson has just made new observations on course of Comet X. Jupiter's gravity has pulled it from parabolic orbit. Instead of moving round sun and out of System, it will fall squarely on that planet. Consequences are incalculable. Warning to all on Comet X. Get off at once, before crash. Ganymede and other Jovian satellites alerted for possible evacuation—Matthews."

They were all gathered around Sparks as the message came through. For a moment there was a deathly silence. Then old Simeon rasped out:

"It's a trick; a dirty trick! They're trying to make us abandon here, so they can grab possession, and make a contest of it!"

But Kerry was staring out of the observation port up at the heavens. "It's not a trick, Mr. Kenton," he said quietly. "I've been wondering for the last few hours. Look above. The enveloping cloud is shredding fast. That means it's being pulled away by a superior gravity. And there—look—you can see Jupiter itself now."

All eyes focussed on the mighty planet. Its disk hung to one side like an immense bulbous eye, winking and glaring balefully through the shreds and tatters of the streaming clouds.

"How much time have we got?" asked Sally.

"It's hard to say under these conditions," said Kerry. "We'd have to get above the envelope to take accurate observations. And by then it may be too late." Grimly he rapped out orders. "Bob, Migs, get every bit of equipment into the hold. Jem, get the ship ready to take off the moment I tell you. Sparks, keep that screen wide for any other messages."

For the next hour there was furious activity. Old Simeon kept staring at the lake of bubbling energy, and wailing: "Billions o' dollars worth o' stuff going to pot!"

Kerry paused a moment in his labors to retort: "Worse than that, Mr. Kenton. We could have revolutionized the System

with it. An inexhaustible supply of power always on tap. No one would have had to work any more."

Old Simeon stopped short in his moaning. "Ha! Har-rumph! That's right. I never thought of that." His face cleared; he even chuckled. "The ways of the Lord are beyond understanding," he said.

Kerry looked puzzled. "I don't get what you're referring to."

"Of course you don't. You're still young. I'm an old man. I've had experience with the human race. What d' ye think would happen if men didn't have t' work any more?"

Kerry was startled. "Why—I suppose they'd have more time to improve their minds, seek out the secrets of the universe, enrich their culture, write, paint—"

"Superbunkum!" snapped the old man. "They'd lose all incentive, get bored, stop thinking and striving, and degenerate into pigs. Young man, within a hundred years they'd be slinking through cities they wouldn't know the use of, and staring helplessly at machines they didn't know how to handle. It's because man has had to work hard to keep from starving, to strive for everything he wanted, that he's gotten places."

"Hear! Hear!" applauded Sally. But Kerry looked thoughtful. "You have something there."

"Of course I have," crowed the old man. Then he stared out at the mighty flow of energy, and his expression changed. He sighed. "If only we could of taken out a few more cubes!"

There was no question now that Comet X was accelerating rapidly toward Jupiter. The last shreds of the radiation envelope had torn away; and even the mighty tail of repelled particles had thinned to an impalpable haze. The disk of the planet was visibly growing and shifting more and more obliquely in the sky. They had to adjust their gravity plates to keep from rocketing upward with every step as Jupiter increased its imperious pull.

"All right!" said Kerry finally. "Close the ports and blast off."

"But there's still equipment outside," Jem protested.

"We can't wait. We're less than a million miles from Jupiter now, and accelerating at a terrific clip. We don't want to be caught too close when the smash comes."

There was a last minute rush. The crew ran to their stations, the ports slid shut, fuel valves opened and, with a combining swirl of liquid hydrogen and oxygen, enriched with para-plutonium, the *Flash* roared upward and clear.

Sally looked down at the orb they had just quitted. The tears stood in her eyes. "What a pity!" she cried. "For hundreds of millions of years that little world rushed through the immensities of space; only to meet its end in our System."

"The one chance in trillions," nodded Kerry. "But if the universe is infinite, it must happen regularly. And," he added suddenly, "it's liable to happen to us *now* if we don't move fast." He raised his voice. "Put on maximum power, Jem, and swing course at right angles on planes Alpha and Gamma. We're running too close."

"Aye, aye, sir."

The *Flash* swerved sharply and righted itself on its new tack. Jupiter had taken on the dimensions of a huge globe spreading over five degrees of arc. The great red spot was plainly visible to the naked eye. It, and the great planet itself, was still as mysterious as in the days before space travel. No ship had ever dared venture into the howling storms of lethal ammonia, cyanogen and other deadly compounds that sweep over its surface.

Comet X was now a mere shining point in the visorscreen, catapulting straight for the somber glow of the great red spot. Closer, closer, ever closer!

"How far are we away, Sparks?" demanded Kerry.

"One million, two hundred and thirty thousand miles."

"I hope that's enough. God knows what will happen when that flow of pure energy smashes into Jupiter!"

"Oh!" exclaimed Sally. "Then how about Ganymede? That's only 664,000 miles away."

"I think they'll be safe," Kerry said. "Luckily, it's now on the far side of Jupiter. The main effect will be on this side."

They hung breathless at the observation port. They were going away fast; but would it be fast enough?

Closer, ever closer!

Then the tiny visitor from another universe vanished, seemed swallowed up in the giant maw.

Instinctively the observers shuddered away from the glassite port. The seconds ticked off.

There was a blinding flash of light, a spurt of furious, boiling matter. Out into space from the surface of the tortured giant it sped, as though it came in vengeful pursuit of the fleeing ship. The next instant the Flash rocked and reeled like a chip in the grip of a tornado. The radiation counters clicked like mad. The controls wrenched from Jem's hands and he was thrown to the deck. Staggering drunkenly, Kerry forced his way to his side, grabbed the rocket levers.

Then the tossing subsided, and Jem came ruefully to his feet, rubbing the side of his head. "That was a close call!" he husked.

To their rear, Jupiter seemed in convulsion. The great red spot had disappeared; in its place was a glowing circle of brilliant white.

Old Simeon said regretfully: "That's the end of Comet X."

But Kerry, intent upon that blazing, bubbling center, said in a queer, strained voice. "It may be the beginning of Jupiter."

"Eh? What do you mean?"

"No ordinary matter can disrupt that core of energy. It's going to keep working away, perhaps forever, within the heart of Jupiter. It will transform the very constitution of the planet. It may well be that the transformation will be such as to make

Jupiter a place for living beings, for civilization. In that case, we've added a huge new world to the System."

"How long d' ye think that'll take?" asked Simeon eagerly.

"Who knows? It might be a hundred thousand years, or a million."

"Huh!" Kenton was manifestly disappointed. He sighed. "An' I thought we'd have a new world to take over. What an opportunity that would have been!"

Kerry laughed. "Don't you think you have enough right now?"

"My boy," said old Simeon sententiously, "no man ever has enough. And that reminds me. How do we divide up what we managed to take out?" His face brightened. "After all, those three cubes of energy must be worth as much as my whole present fortune."

"No doubt," observed Kerry. He had a strange expression on his face. "I'm turning one over for public use. I'm keeping one for myself. I'm dividing the avails of the third among the crew—and Sally."

"Hey! How about my share?" sputtered the old man.

"Yours?" Kerry smiled gently. "You have no share."

"You promised me as much as the others," howled Simeon. "It was a contract. I have witnesses—"

"Of course there was a contract, and I never go back on my word."

"Then what the devil do you mean I have no share?"

"I'll quote you my exact words. I said I'd give you one-twentieth of everything we take out from now on. *From now on!* But we *didn't* take out anything else. *Your* share, my dear Mr. Kenton, is unfortunately now a part of Jupiter."

Old Fireball shook his fist, danced in rage. "Why, you blathering cross-doubler; you—"

"There you go murdering our poor language again, dad," said Sally severely. "Kerry is quoting the contract accurately.

And a contract is a contract, isn't it. I've heard you say that a hundred times."

Simeon glared at his dutiful daughter. "I've been hornswoggled again!"

"No doubt about it. But I'll ease the pain. I'll give you that effigy we brought from the comet. There *may* be something immensely valuable inside."

His face cleared. "Now that's a good girl!" he cried eagerly. "Let's open it at once."

They brought it out, with its strange, lovely features incised on the unknown metal. They examined it carefully, searching every inch of its seemingly seamless surface until they found a tiny knob. On pressure, the case swung noiselessly open.

A gasp of wonder rose from everyone. Inside, as though asleep, was a being. A being not of this universe; with infinitely delicate features, yet imbued with an expression of supernal majesty and intellect.

Sally was frankly crying. "The last of his race! What a glorious civilization it must have been."

"Perhaps," said Kerry gently, "his descendants still exist in some distant universe. Perhaps they have gone on to even more glorious things."

But old Simeon was rubbing his hands. "This is priceless!" he crowed. "The Commission will pay anything I name for this."

But even as he spoke, the body began to change. The colors coarsened, the features ran together and turned a dirty brown. Then, without warning, the whole thing collapsed into a pile of dust.

"Hey!" yelled Kenton in alarm.

Kerry said: "It's the air. I've heard of things like this happening to mummies removed from their vaults on Earth."

Old Fireball fell back weakly. "Hornswoggled again!" he groaned.

"I'm sorry, dad," said Sally remorsefully.

The old man straightened up. "Don't you be sorry for me," he snapped. "Kerry, my boy," he said impressively. "I'm offering you a full partnership in Kenton Space Enterprises, Unlimited."

"What's the catch?"

"Who said there was a catch?" glared Simeon. Then he chuckled. "Naturally, I've got tremendous assets. You're to put in your cube of energy."

"Done!"

"Now you're showing sense, my boy."

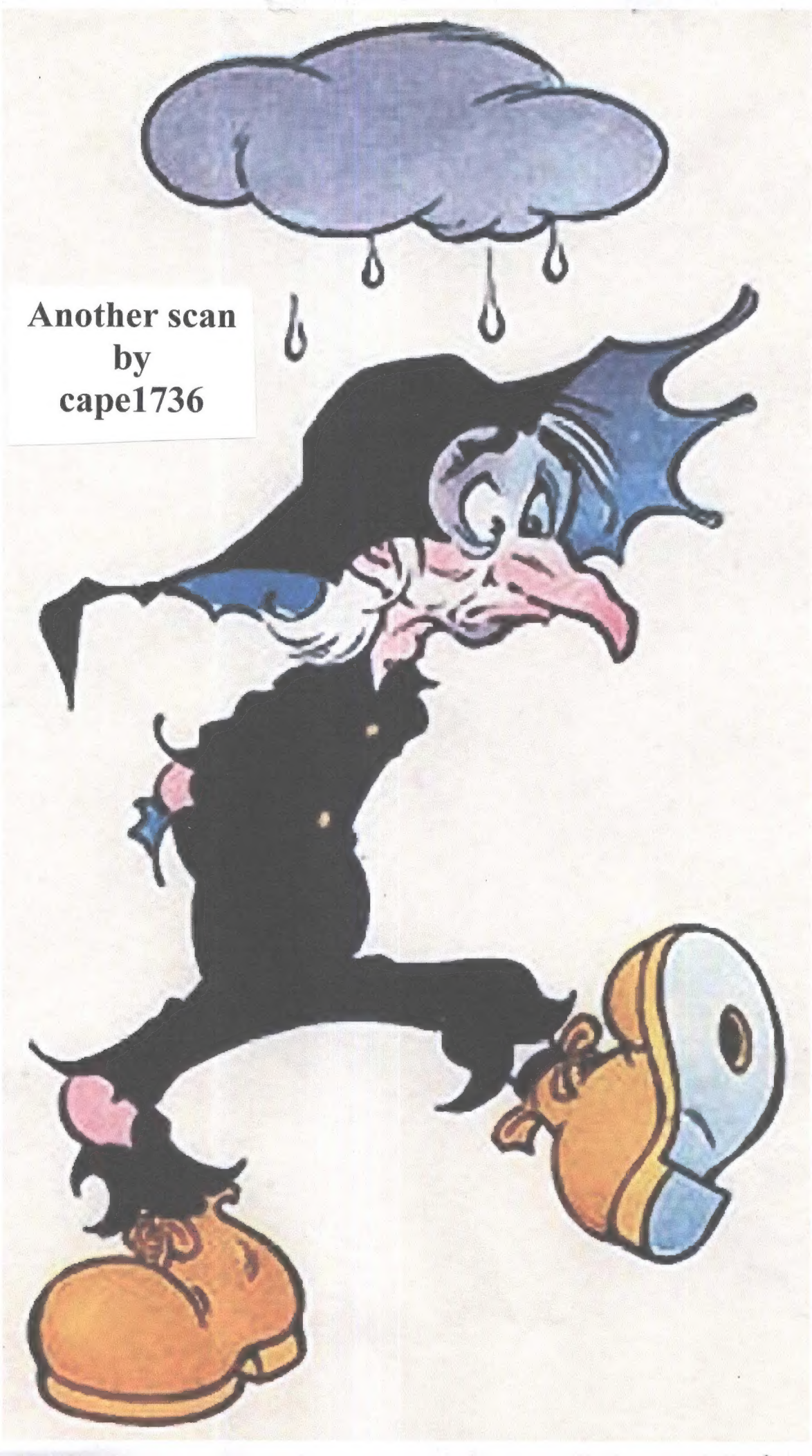
"But on one condition."

"Eh, what's that?"

Kerry turned to Sally, said gravely: "That your daughter marry me."

"You're hornswoggled again, dad," said Sally blithely. Then she said to Kerry: "Done! But remember," she warned, "I'm no asset; I'm a terrific liability. Ask dad, he knows!"

"I'll take my chances on that," he said; and took her into his arms.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